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AMONG the many important questions raised by audience members during the Vice-Chancellor's most recent Zoom Q&A was whether staff should be required, as a condition for their continuing in work, to be vaccinated in the interests of collective medical safety. Having noted that this is a peculiarly difficult issue, the V-C responded that the University had no policy as yet and that the next step should be consultation.

The problem is that "consultation" covers a multitude of sins. At its best it is an essential tool in any democratic system; an opening up of a question for everybody's opinion to be voiced, then leading on to some sort of agreed consensual decision-making process—genuine 'deliberative democracy' in other words. The University occasionally undertakes all-staff "consultations" but only in carefully selected situations. Thus the current consultation on sustainability makes sense; it concerns measures to address climate change which are of very general importance and potentially major future impact. From the University's point of view it is a 'safe' topic in that nobody is likely to challenge its appropriateness and timeliness.

Consultation

However, such consultations have built-in limitations; the possible answers are circumscribed by the forms of the questions (i.e. outcomes can to some degree be predetermined by who initiates the exercise and what questions they happen to ask). But however open-ended and comprehensive the consultation stage, everything still depends on how the results are to be used in reaching a final decision.

In past decades the University went to considerable trouble in conducting consultations as informatively as possible; by tabulating in detail and making openly available the range of answers returned (including any 'further comments') and also by the breaking down of the departmental origins of respondents so that the representativeness of the answers could be judged. This now no longer happens (with the possible exception of the two-yearly Staff Experience Survey). Thus, to take a particularly important recent example, in the consultations leading up to the creation and acceptance of the current Strategic Plan we were given very little more than the total numbers of respondents to basically Yes/No questions concerning already predetermined options.

Oxford Magazine publication arrangements

We are unable to publish the *Oxford Magazine* in print for the foreseeable future, as a result of COVID19-related working restrictions. Arrangements for archival copies will be made at a later date.

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...and much more

In theory it should be getting easier to gather viewpoints and data throughout the University using IT. In theory all-staff or Congregation opinions could be sought on a regular basis without any physical meetings but simply through electronic polls. So, why not do this on the issue of compulsory vaccination? One counter-argument would be that the above-described problems surrounding *any* consultation process remain and matter all the more when issues involving fundamental matters of principle are involved. It is too easy for certain well-organised and highly motivated factions to skew poll numbers and any of the usual ways of deriving a decision in consequence of a vote or a poll (either on the basis of the majority view or through further 'committee' stage deliberations) leave minority opinions unaccounted for and unsatisfied.

In some cases, such as pensions, it is self-evident that it is in all parties' interests to converge on an agreed policy and that all parties have comparable purchase on the evidence, arguments and decision-making process. In other, more confrontational, cases—such as Cambridge's recent voting on free speech policy, discussed in two articles in this issue of the *Magazine*—everything can hinge on the choice of certain words and on differing understandings not just on their precise meaning but also on their varying cultural and political significance for sections of the community.

Difficult as the vaccination question is—it seems likely that the University's policy will soon be determined by the government's evolving attitude to vaccine 'passporting'—the University faces even harder decisions and al-

ways will. Take 'Rhodes Must Fall'. Despite the fact that this is strictly a matter involving Oriel College, this sort of issue affects the University as a whole. And yet a University-wide poll would hardly be legitimate. Oriel chose to delegate the decision to a "Commission" which has yet to report. The Commission has taken the enlightened step of putting on the open web its two data-gathering meetings to take evidence from relevant experts. It has also invited written submissions from the public. However, it has not indicated—on its website at least—how any of this material will be used or how fully its deliberations and final decision-making will be made publicly accessible.

A decision on a matter as sensitive and controversial as this surely requires the most careful and fully open procedures. It is not enough that a consultation canvasses opinion widely and openly; equally important—but so rarely achieved—is the recording of the rationale and the process (the arguments pro and con) that were the basis of the final decision. Consider the possibility that public sentiment—not to speak of government policy on public monuments—shifts over time, e.g. a decision this year is thought, in a few years hence, to merit revision or possible reversal. In reaching such a revised decision it would be all-important that the grounds and evidence for the original decision were available as the basis for the subsequently continued debates. (And what about the longer term future—will all this material just go the way of all digital data.....into the cloud and eventually the ether?)

B.B, T.J.H

Meanwhile, an update on the *Magazine's* new scheme for inviting questions from staff members on matters of concern to them for forwarding to Wellington Square for authoritative answers. So far we have forwarded three questions. As yet we have received no answers.

Questions and answers will be published in our new Q&A column as soon as possible; answers will be forwarded to questioners themselves as soon as they are received. We remind readers that their names will only be revealed to Wellington Square or published in the Q&A column with their prior agreement, in order to allow greater freedom for staff to raise controversial or sensitive issues with safety.

Please send us your questions.

Houses of Wisdom

– universities, scholarship and diversity of perspective

SIR MICHAEL BARBER

The following extracts are taken (with permission) from Sir Michael Barber's King's College, London, Commemoration Lecture published on 29th January 2021. It was in three parts: Who enters... What intellectual culture... What should scholarship look like....? – eds

ONE of the first things I did on being appointed Chair of the OfS was to read the Robbins Report, published in 1963, from cover to cover. It is a remarkable piece of work and nothing comparable from an official source has been published since.

*"Our guiding principle," it asserts, "is that...all young persons qualified by ability and attainment to pursue a full-time course in higher education should have the ability to do so."*¹

This surely remains the right guiding principle though we can now add 'part-time' study of higher education courses as well. The Secretary of State recently said that the 50 percent target was no longer on his agenda. He is right, it is no longer needed. While there is no need for a further target, we should be wary of a limit. The changing nature of the labour market combined with the continuing improvement of our school system, make it highly likely that more school leavers will aspire to higher education in future than have in the past. International comparisons reinforce that view strongly.

This additional demand will be further enhanced if the diversity of routes to a degree continues to grow. For example, there has been impressive and welcome growth in the availability of degree apprenticeships, including in some of our most prestigious research-intensive universities. If the option of assembling a degree over a decade or so, combined with periods of work, takes off, as recommended by Philip Augar, one can see still further demand for higher education being unlocked. And in any case, as this year of the pandemic shows, there is no sign that demand for a higher education is tailing off. On the contrary, it continues to grow.

Those who argue that fifty percent of the cohort going to university is too large a percentage not only ignore what is going on around the globe; they also, whether they intend it or not, stand in the way of social mobility. In South Korea, 70 percent of 25-34 year olds hold a tertiary education qualification.² In England, 58 percent of 18-30 year olds from the highest participation neighbourhoods attend university; whereas just 28 percent from the lowest participation areas do so.³ In other words, the argument for a cap on numbers is simply that "while, of course, my children will attend university, other people's children don't need to." This doesn't seem right for Houses of Wisdom.

The lifting of the numbers cap in 2013 not only opened up universities to more students, it also created more op-

portunities for more students than ever before from low income, and other disadvantaged backgrounds, to seize the opportunity of a higher education. Admissions in 2020, in spite of the pandemic, have further advanced that progress. Combined with Access and Participation Plans, the absence of a student numbers cap is a key ingredient for the revolution in social mobility.

This is not to argue that every young person should go to university. Far from it. There will be students who don't or don't want to, at this point in their lives, meet the Robbins principle. For them, there are, or should be, courses of quality available in further education or apprenticeships that equip them for the labour market of the future and set them on course to learn throughout life. Companies such as Multiverse (until recently known as WhiteHat) are innovating radically in precisely this area by offering a combination of apprenticeships with what they call the "full stack" experience of higher education, all of it online.

....The result would then be that every young person considering their options at ages 15-18, instead of seeing a binary choice between going to university and a range of other less esteemed choices, would see an appealing, worthwhile spectrum of opportunity. The options would range from high-tariff courses at research intensive universities through to well-designed apprenticeships which combine learning with work, each of which has different benefits and each of which is, in any case, not an irreversible choice, but a worthwhile next step in a lifetime of learning.

And who chooses which routes should be determined not by race, creed, gender, family income or location – but by aspiration, ability to benefit and what Martin Luther King called "the content of your character".

The crucial point is this – the choices on the spectrum should be available equitably, regardless of upbringing or family income. The different educational pathways should reflect different routes to fulfilment in life, not means of cascading income differentials through the generations. So, if you care what kind of society we are building and if you think the status quo is unacceptable, it does matter that, regardless of background, anyone can choose from the full spectrum of opportunity. Critics sometimes describe the fairness I am describing as social engineering – perhaps it is, but it is much less so than consciously constructing the future to replicate the past. I don't call it social engineering; I call it levelling up, which I am glad to see at the heart of the current government's programme.

This agenda matters not just to society but to institutions too. Any true House of Wisdom surely wants the best available talent to join it, not just the sons and daughters of the well-connected. (One of the qualities I most admire in this country – compared to the Ivy League, for example – is that a donation to a university endowment would not buy access to it for your child.)

If our universities are to be Houses of Wisdom, it also

matters, of course, what happens when they get there; what curriculum is offered, how it is taught and learnt, the degree of challenge involved, the support available at times of need, the facilities from libraries to learning spaces, the wider student experience and, above all, the progress students are able to make, the degrees they, hopefully, succeed in getting and the opportunities in life and work that success opens up. Many of these features are extraordinarily challenging to deliver in this time of pandemic. I salute all those in universities: students, faculties and administration who are making the most of such difficult circumstances. Detailed planning, creativity and generosity of spirit will get us through.

Here my point is that the Access and Participation Plans, which all universities registered with OfS have put in place, are central, not just to social mobility, but also to the well-being, resilience and diversity of universities themselves. The shift from annual plans to plans that set ambitions five years ahead, to focusing equally on access and participation, to the inclusion of progression into the labour market, to monitoring progress against trajectories set by the universities themselves and to active sharing of best practices across the sector, has resulted in the active pursuit of an agenda that is potentially transformative.

If institutions achieve the goals they have set themselves, we will see some of the most stubborn access gaps at the most selective universities – long-standing barriers to social mobility in our country – halved within five years and eliminated entirely within twenty years. What a prize that would be! Our most selective universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, are to be saluted for their ambition. Oxford University has committed to ensure that 25% of the British undergraduates it admits come from low-income backgrounds. Wadham College has built an entirely new building to make a reality of its aspirations in this regard – clearly it aspires to be, or to continue to be, a House of Wisdom.

....In short, Access and Participation Plans cannot be dismissed as a regulatory burden; they are a statement of intent, a potentially transformative contribution not just to the higher education system but also to the society of the future.

* * *

....Can they create an intellectual culture in the institution that is diverse, challenging, mind-opening, demanding and sometimes destabilising? Is it connected to, engaged with, and contributing to the community and world around it? Does the culture start from, in Matthew Arnold's famous words, "the best which has been thought and said in the world" and cherish it, contest it and build on it? In short, a culture which is intellectually uncomfortable but empowering. The kind of culture that encourages widely divergent views on ethics and the missing shade of blue. Open.

Or is it uniform, manageable, mind-numbing, easy-going and safe? Does it avoid difficult questions? Is it an escape from the community and world around it? In short, a culture which is intellectually comfortable but enfeebling. The kind of culture that is apologetic about David Hume – not because of his philosophy – but because in the 18th Century he didn't match 21st Century ethical standards, what Thomas Devine, one of Scotland's leading historians, called "the intellectual sin of anachronistic judgement."⁴ Closed.

....There is extensive debate these days about freedom of speech. On the one side, those who argue that more should be done to prevent the "no-platforming" of controversial speakers; on the other those who say this is all much exaggerated and just another front in the culture wars. I side with the former. To me, it seems obvious that speakers such as Jenni Murray or Amber Rudd should be welcome on campuses, regardless of their views. Advocates of differing perspectives on possible futures for Hong Kong, free markets or planned economies, the future of the Middle East, the impact of British Empire on people and history and transgender rights, all these and more, should be welcome, heard and debated.

I am often told that the vast majority of such possibly controversial speaking engagements do in fact go ahead. I am willing to believe that this is the case, but I would love to see the data. It is hardly a job for a regulator but if I were a university administrator or an influence at UUK, I would be collecting the data. Then, when a cancellation happened or a speech was prevented by protest, I would at least be ready to point out – if, in fact, it turned out to be the case – that for every event cancelled in response to protest there had been 250 that went ahead. One speech blocked would still be a stain on freedom of speech, but the context would be clearer.

My critique of the current free speech debate is not that it is too extensive but that it is too limited. After all, the conceptual rule for such events is surely clear; a university should be a place that actively promotes and protects the widest possible freedom of speech within the law. If that is accepted, then invitations to controversial speakers raise merely practical questions – how do you ensure events go ahead in spite of opposition; how do you allow peaceful protest against the event but not the prevention of the event itself?

In any case, events with controversial speakers are, in my view, only one part, albeit symbolically important, of the much wider question I have raised about the intellectual culture of a university. If that culture is right – open and uncomfortable as opposed to closed and comfortable – such events will go ahead. Much more important from this point of view, though, is the intellectual culture in the tutorial, classroom and lecture hall (whether face-to-face or digital). As Ed Byrne and Charles Clarke argue, universities have a duty to "uphold freedom of speech under the law and sustain a ... culture that gives priority to a true and rounded intellectual and cultural history that deals with history as it is and not how it might or should have been."⁵

This is not a matter just of principle, it is also a critical and practical aspect of the quality of a student's academic experience. Is that experience challenging, diverse, open, rigorous? Is its foundation what Timothy Garton Ash calls "robust civility"? In a passage less famous than the one I quoted earlier, but no less profound, the Robbins report argues that, over and above preparing students for the future economy, a university should ensure that "what is taught is taught in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind."⁶ Those general powers must surely include the ability to debate and argue, on the one hand, and to listen, clarify and understand, on the other.

....A recent Policy Exchange report, *Academic Freedom in the UK*, concluded that "...there is widespread support for discrimination on political grounds in publication, hiring and promotion. This threatens academic freedom

and likely results in self-censorship.” The authors base this conclusion on a survey of academics which suggested, among other things, that only “54% of academics said that they would feel comfortable sitting next to a known Leave supporter at lunch...A third of academics would seek to avoid hiring a known Leave supporter” and that, “between a third and a half of those reviewing a grant bid would mark it lower if it took a right-wing perspective.”⁷ Perhaps for these reasons, only 30 percent of academics in the social sciences and history took the view that, even outside the classroom, a Leave supporter would be “comfortable expressing their beliefs to a colleague”.⁸

Some have challenged the selection of questions in the Policy Exchange survey but, even allowing for a generous margin of error, the picture painted in the report must surely be a matter of concern. The issues it raises go far beyond those raised in the lines just quoted. Who selects and shapes the curriculum? What books are selected, or not, for the library? What books are on display in the campus bookshop? What counts as a good essay or answer in an exam?

The case is consistently made, and rightly, for equity, diversity and inclusion in relation to social background, gender, ethnicity, religion, age and disability. Should it not be made with similar vigour for diversity of perspective? As Matthew Syed has argued, cognitive dissonance enhances the quality of decision-making. “Rebel ideas”, in his words, are to be welcomed.

I don’t underestimate the challenge for contemporary universities in establishing the kind of culture I am advocating here. Perhaps I will be accused of naiveté, in which case I plead guilty. I simply point out that all the alternatives are worse, much worse. In fact, I’d argue strongly that the emphasis I am giving to an intellectual culture, which values and encourages genuine diversity of perspective, is not just consistent with the emphasis on access and participation in the first section [above], but integral to it. How can we possibly open up our universities to every strand of our diverse, modern, global societies unless we foster in them the most diverse range of perspectives possible within the law?

...The tendency I am referring to is best described in the work of Lukiano and Haidt. Greg Lukiano is a top lawyer and expert on the First Amendment; Jonathan Haidt is a world-renowned social psychologist. Their 2018 book *The Coddling of the American Mind* lays bare the direction of travel in the US. They argue that good intentions based on “three bad ideas” are doing increasing damage to the intellectual culture of American higher education and, as a result, to an entire generation of young people. They describe these bad ideas thus.

1. The Untruth of Fragility: What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker
Hence, they argue, a growing belief that students need to be protected from ideas and facts that might be uncomfortable.
2. The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: Always trust your feelings
Hence, they argue, the growing view that whether a statement or action is a “micro-aggression” is entirely a matter of the listener’s interpretation.
3. The Untruth of Us versus Them: Life is a battle between good people and evil people
Hence, they argue, that identity politics increasingly leads to defining an identity in relation to a common enemy – good versus evil – rather than in relation to a common humanity.

The book gives plenty of examples of these Untruths in action and of how good intentions based on these bad ideas lead to serious threats to freedom of speech and thought on campus. The most absurd examples they give are a ban, at the University of Connecticut, on “inappropriately directed laughter” and a rule at Jacksonville State University in Alabama which says, “No student shall offend anyone on University property.”

I am glad to say that I have yet to see examples of equivalent absurdity here in Britain. I don’t think that what Lukiano and Haidt describe as “the culture of safety-ism” is out of control here, at least not yet. I draw it to your attention because I see straws in the wind. I see the speed with which some unfashionable ideas are condemned. I see the growing courage required to express certain ideas that are well within the law. And I see orthodoxies established and accepted which limit debate. Incidentally, these issues are not confined to the social sciences and the humanities; ask any scientist whose findings have challenged a well-established orthodoxy. Galileo is not the only one to have suffered as a result.

I ask two questions; do you see any signs that we might be heading in the direction Lukiano and Haidt describe? If so, isn’t this the time to speak up for the fullest possible freedom of speech, for academic freedom and for robust civility? If not, there is every reason to speak up for these things in any case, because they are fundamental to the health of our culture and the argument for them always needs to be made. Moreover, the reputation of our higher education institutions depends on their ability to command public confidence, which in turn means they need to be clear what they stand for. This surely is essential if we are to create and sustain Houses of Wisdom.

* * *

...I found [Dame Helen Gardner’s *In Defence of the Imagination*] compelling and it changed the way I understood literature. That, however, is irrelevant to my argument here. My point is this; scholarship of this quality is surely one of the most important contributions (perhaps, over the long run, the most important) universities make to our society and culture. Great scholarship that challenges orthodoxies and shifts our understanding of the world we are in. It is fundamental to the growth of the human mind and the depth of our culture. The place we are most likely to find it is in a university. Do we currently cherish it sufficiently?

I have listed as an appendix a handful of books I happen to have read over the years that represent, obviously just in my view, equivalent great scholarship across a range of subjects. There is no pattern to the list – except that at some point each of them appealed to me and influenced my thinking. I’m a historian by background so there is a bias in that direction. Nearly all of them were written by people working in universities, but even in the case of those that weren’t, you will find, if you check the acknowledgements, that university people and libraries were vital ingredients. Some of the books were easier to read than others, but all of them excited, in Helen Gardner’s words, my intellectual curiosity and “enlarged” my being. In my words, my life would have been much diminished if I hadn’t stumbled across them. They are cited simply to give the reader an idea of what I mean by scholarship.

In our contemporary dialogue about universities, there

is great emphasis on utility, on the contribution research and teaching make to the regional, national and global economy; and on the value of a degree, measured in future earnings as set out, for example, in the LEO data. Sometimes too, the idea that universities make, or should make, a civic contribution is added; when this is done well it most certainly enriches communities. Each of these contributions to the future are hugely important to individuals, communities and society. A problem arises only if we believe these things are all that universities contribute.

These categories miss or, at best, leave implicit the notion of scholarship. Yet it is in scholarship that ideas are born or contested, insights revealed, and imaginations opened to new possibilities. To give a minor example, when I was an undergraduate, my medieval history tutor once recommended an obscure article in the *English Historical Review* entitled *What did not Happen in Stephen's Reign*; I can't remember any more what did and didn't, but I've been aware ever since of the counterfactual and its importance in argument.

Scholarship of this kind is not confined to the humanities or social sciences. Far from it. It is possible and necessary across every subject and, increasingly, at the intersection of subjects. Nevertheless, because in the hard sciences there is (very welcome) substantial and increasing investment in research, perhaps the case for scholarship needs to be made most boldly in relation to the humanities, the arts and social sciences.

Since plenty of students continue to choose these subjects, bringing with them their tuition fees, there is no impending crisis. However, we will put them at risk if we fail to prioritise them, or fail to recognise scholarship as an end in itself, regardless of utility, and see it merely as luxury. The threat is not sudden catastrophe but downward drift which somehow doesn't get noticed till too late. The

trend in the US is far from encouraging as the table below illustrates.

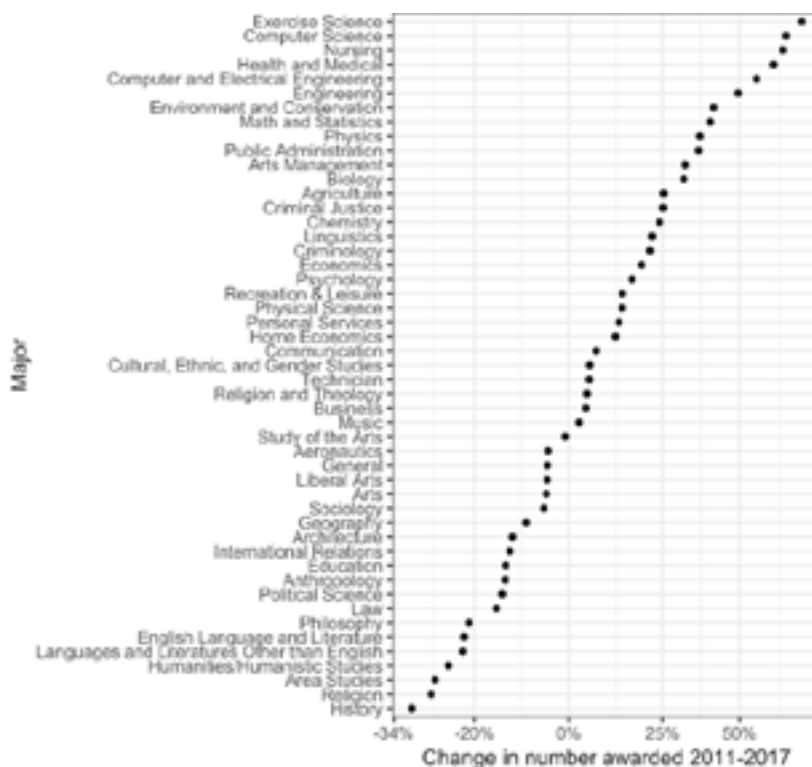
It breaks my heart to see that history is in such steep decline. I don't believe the widely held view that what happens now in America is necessarily a sign of things to come here. I am including this table in the hope of having precisely the opposite effect. At the very least, we need to be aware of this trend.

The other threat to subjects such as history is the group-think in parts of the academy that I described in the previous section. "True openness", argued Allan Bloom in his *cri de coeur* three decades ago, "means closedness to all the charms that make us comfortable..."⁹ In other words, once "comfortable", as opposed to "scholarship", becomes the objective of a university education, we have lost our way.

Scholarship, like research and teaching, depends not just on great thinking by great scholars but also on the infrastructure of knowledge that enables scholars to do their work, above all, on libraries and archives. It is all too easy to think of these merely as dusty collections of books or papers but neither libraries or archives are much use without librarians and archivists. Collections have to be managed or, more precisely, curated; obviously looked after and protected against heat, light and water. Crucially, they also have to be constantly refreshed and sometimes weeded out. As Richard Ovenden argues "...librarians and archivists, the custodians of the past...are (also) the advance guard of the future".¹⁰

There was a time, not so many centuries ago when, if you had the resources, you could aspire to have in your library every significant book there had ever been. Indeed, the early Abbasid caliphs had such aspirations: they sent scholars on extensive journeys in search of particular texts they had heard about but not seen; when they

Alexander, B., *Academia Next: The Futures for Higher Education* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020)



won wars, they sometimes demanded books as part of the peace settlement.

This aspiration obviously no longer makes sense for an individual library. Still modern technology connects libraries and archives across the world in ways that until recently were unthinkable. Thus, almost everyone can have access to almost everything. A revolution is happening in the management of knowledge, as profound as the Arab discovery of the Chinese art of making paper, or the invention of the printing press. It has huge potential. It is happening very rapidly, and we are in danger of missing its significance and perhaps of making some irreversible mistakes.

This revolution in the management and storage of information, barely gets a mention in contemporary debate of universities. Senior staff salaries and grade inflation make headlines, libraries and archives don't. On university visits, (for example to Leeds, Birmingham and Queen's College, Oxford) I have seen evidence of major capital investment in new or modernised libraries. These places are places not just where knowledge and ideas are preserved, not just where scholarship is valued and fostered but also where, as Richard Ovenden says, students can find sanctuary. These are wonderful, the result of far-seeing university leadership taking advantage of low interest rates and/or generous benefactors, but all too often libraries and archives are seen merely as an overhead. In fact, they are a fundamental element of the infrastructure of knowledge, short, medium and long-term, vital to enabling teaching, research and scholarship of the highest quality now and in future.

But the renewal of a building is only the start. Books and archives have to be cared-for, cherished and curated for the very long run... What is at stake is the preservation of knowledge for an unknowable future. Today's utility, while clearly relevant, is not the most important issue. As Richard Ovenden concludes, "Libraries and archives take the long view of civilisation in a world that currently takes the short-term view. We ignore their importance at our peril."¹¹

There are threats from fire and flood and sometimes, much worse, from the intentional burning of books for ideological reasons. (Ovenden gives dramatic and daunting examples of all these threats and quotes the famous warning from Heinrich Heine, "Wherever they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn human beings.")

...Everyone surely would wish to guard against such devastation. Arson is an obvious threat but other threats may not be so clear-cut. While, for example, diversifying the curriculum should be welcomed, what are the potential consequences of "decolonising the curriculum" for libraries and archives? Might old texts or carefully stored archives go the same way as some statues recently or those books at Gormenghast?

Meanwhile the drive for digitisation goes on. It has many hugely positive aspects, such as the electronic connecting up of different libraries and the ability to store information in previously unimaginable quantities and to search it quickly and easily. The problem is we haven't made important, conscious, decisions about how these materials should be protected and who should control and oversee them. Wonderful though the devices and services of the big tech companies undoubtedly are, are these companies really the organisations we want to shape the preservation of our knowledge of the past and the present?

Are they the organisations we want to make judgments about what is preserved and what isn't? Do they know (or care) about what is the best that has been thought and said? Should we, in Ovenden's words, place "the future of cultural memory under their control"?

Would that create Houses of Wisdom?

In any case, in this world of cybercrime, cyberwarfare and growing authoritarianism, how can we be sure for the very long-term, that the preservation will be secure? In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell explains that in the dystopia he describes "Every record has been destroyed or falsified... Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right."¹²

That is the polar opposite of Houses of Wisdom.

Perhaps then it would be better that these fundamental elements of the infrastructure of knowledge are housed in universities or great museums? Not in one institution but in many. Not in one country but in many. Just as diversity in access and participation should be fundamental to Houses of Wisdom, just as diversity of perspective should be fundamental to Houses of Wisdom, so diversity should apply to the way we think about libraries and archives. The fundamental choice is between giving control of the future of knowledge to the collection of companies that Shoshana Zubo has labelled the "surveillance capitalists" or giving it to a network of Houses of Wisdom.

I doubt I am alone in preferring the second option but, if we accept that line of argument, we then face urgent, practical questions, not least regarding funding. That shouldn't be the responsibility of current undergraduates. Though the case for them sharing some of the cost of their education through tuition fees is strong; that they should also bear the burden for a societies' cultural memory seems far-fetched. Similarly, it is hard to argue that Research Councils or Foundations should cover these costs in research grants. Ovenden proposes, therefore, that the private digital superpowers, who have after all proved adept at avoiding tax, should be subject to a "memory tax" which a society would then use to ensure transparent and principled preservation of knowledge. After all, the culture we pass on is a public good. The detail would, of course, be important but Ovenden's idea seems to be worth exploring.

¹ Robbins, L., 1963. *Higher Education* (Command 2154 HMSO), p.49

² OECD, <https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/population-with-tertiary-education.htm>

³ Comparison of POLAR4 quintile 5 with quintile 1, 2018-19: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/gap-in-participation-between-most-and-least-represented-groups/>

⁴ Devine, T., quoted in The Herald, 'David Hume: Sir Tom Devine slams University of Edinburgh's decision to remove name from building', published 13 September 2020: <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/18717932.david-hume-sir-tom-devine-slams-university-edinburghs-decision/>

⁵ Byrne, E., Clarke, C., 2020. *The University Challenge* (Harlow), p.239

⁶ Robbins, L., 1963. *Higher Education* (Command 2154 HMSO), p.6

⁷ Adeyoka, R., Kaufmann, E., Simpson, T., 2020. 'Academic freedom in the UK: Protecting viewpoint diversity', Policy Exchange, pp.7-8. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Academic-freedom-in-the-UK.pdf>

⁸ Ibid., p.10

⁹ Bloom, T., 1988. *The Closing of the American Mind* (Penguin), p.42

¹⁰ Ovenden, R., 2020. *Burning the Books: A history of knowledge under attack* (John Murray), p.222

¹¹ Ibid., p.233

¹² Quoted from Ovenden, R., 2020. *Burning the Books: A history of knowledge under attack* (John Murray), p.230

Could Australia be showing us the future for UK higher education?

DAVID PALFREYMAN

GOOGLE ‘Howard, “*Rethinking Australian higher education*” ’ and up will pop a free downloadable 325pp 2021 book, subtitled ‘Towards a diversified system for the 21st century’. Skim it, mentally crossing out ‘Australia’ and substituting ‘UK’ – and, for the most part, you will get a diagnosis of the problems facing UK Higher Education and an outline of what could well be a very similar Government policy approach to the rethinking, reshaping, and reforming of, at least, English HE. If in this country we had anybody doing anything challenging and interesting in the world of HE policy analysis somebody would apply the methodology and format of Howard’s work to give us the same valuable diagnosis and prognosis for UK HE.

Howard’s aim is clear: ‘how to resolve the underlying problems with the higher education system and seize the opportunities to create a vibrant higher education system that is fit for purpose’.

Here are a few of the diagnostic overlaps from that far away country:

- ‘The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated collapse of international student numbers have revealed some fundamental weaknesses in the system’s structure and operation that have been building up over many years.’
- ‘There is doom and gloom all around.’
- HE has been ‘in a “bubble” situation’ and this has ‘encouraged both hubris and complacency’ while masking unsustainable ‘university strategies’ as well as growing problems ‘with overloaded management structures and administrative inefficiencies’ (‘University management has been a bit like a ‘black box’, and unlike public administration (and later public management) had not been considered worthy of serious attention around reform and realignment.’).
- And in response to its frustration with HE the Government ‘wants universities to do more ‘job ready’ education, shifting the emphasis of higher education from academic learning to occupational learning’.
- Thus, ‘higher education is at the cusp of a process of rationalisation, disruption, and transformation’ (‘A changing paradigm’) – his examples of the drivers of change include: ‘students looking for alternatives in non-university education’ (as Government begins to reverse ‘the substantial under promotion and underinvestment in public technical and further education’); potential new entrants to the HE industry offering innovation and competition; ‘substitutes’ by way of ‘online and multi-modal

delivery options’ (accelerated by the Covid disruption to campus teaching – hence the Australian version of the QAA has studied ‘the nature of students’ experience in the transition process’ (TEQSA, 2020), echoing the similar exercise currently being undertaken for English HE by Sir Michael Barber); and ‘rivalry’ among the existing players ‘as the student market contracts’.

And the prognosis by way of a possible solution?

– a less monolithic HE industry with much greater institutional segmentation and diversification by way of ‘differentiated roles in teaching, research, and engagement’ (pp8/9 provide a grid setting out the strategic profiles for 11 types of segmented institutions). And there may well be less need for all that campus bricks and mortar – ‘The campus model of the university is changing’; not least since the HE industry may well have ‘hit “peak demand” for bachelor courses’ (back in 2014 for Australia, and perhaps soon here? – ‘The Bradley policy of 40% of the workforce to have a university education has come under increasing scrutiny – in Australia and in the UK where the Blair target of 50% is being wound back.’).

* * *

Some of the recent trends down under are exactly mirrored up here: ‘international student income has increased from 8.3% in 1998, to 12.5% in 2002, and 22.7% in 2019’; the overseas fees have surged way ahead of inflation – from c\$16250 on average per student in 2005 to c\$24250 by 2019 (inflation adjusted numbers); ‘the number of international students more than doubled to 363,377’ over the period 2005-2018 (c.f. UK HE ‘exports’ amount to c550k from such students); academic staff numbers down from 65% to 60% while general admin bods grew from 19% to 25.5% (the same ‘administrative bloat’ that Peter Oppenheimer so engagingly chronicles in these pages in relation to our beloved Wellington Square HQ); and borrowing has increased six-fold at the ‘research intensive’ universities over 2002-2018 as they have built and built and built (and that is where much of the extra fees revenue has gone – on servicing this debt burden).

In both countries the story is also similar in terms of the fact that universities prioritise research over teaching while ensuring total obfuscation in their accounting practices so as to hide how much they spend on R as opposed to T, and in order to disguise the transfer of funds from

tuition fees to the propping up of R activity. As here, down there the Us work on the vague guess that academics deploy 40% of their time to T, 40% to R, and 20% to the joys of administration. Howard labels ‘the excess of staff time and costs over and above that required for teaching’ as ‘the teaching surplus’ and notes that the Australian Government’s 2020 ‘Job ready graduates’ proposals are designed to remove that surplus, to transfer resources back from R and deploy them in T (‘Elimination of the ‘teaching surplus’....so that ‘the cost of research will have to be financed from other sources’ –but ‘we await the government’s strategy for putting university research on a sustainable basis’... Perhaps rather less of it outside of certain ‘high-priority’ academic areas!).

But, as regards the ‘Job ready graduates’ policy, there may be a downside in ‘subverting the role of the humanities, arts, and social sciences’ since, actually, there is some evidence that graduates in such areas are not necessarily utterly unemployable –their ‘soft skills’ and ‘critical thinking’ along with ‘the capacity to think and learn’ have attractions for employers. The scheme seeks to: ‘align funding of courses with the cost of delivery; increase the focus on national interest courses; and achieve a better balance between public and private benefits’. Thus, ‘price signals’ are to be deployed to push students towards ‘high-priority’ courses –such degree courses in, say, Maths/IT/ Education will incur fees some \$10k less p.a. than those in the humanities and the arts (and business studies, economics, law) while more costly-to-deliver courses such as Engineering/Physics/Chemistry/Nursing will be \$7k less (interestingly English is lumped in with Maths & IT). And the Job Ready idea is also meant to refocus attention on students –an Aussie Office FOR Students? –as well as to ‘force the university lobby to address its massive public relations failure’.

It is an interesting historical observation that, over recent decades, Australia has often led the way in HE reforms, to be followed a little later by very similar policy changes in the UK. ‘[T]he challenges ahead’ for universities in that far away country seem rather similar to the ones we face in UK HE –‘an image problem’ compounded by ‘an inferior public relations strategy’ and a tendency ‘to operate in an echo chamber’. But there is ‘an opportunity to break with the past’ as presented by ‘the Covid-19 financial shock’ –to move away from an outdated ‘unified national system’ to ‘a diversified national system’.

David Palfreyman is a Member of the OfS Board but writes here in a purely personal capacity.

Free to Go

The directions from the people at reception were clear enough, uninterested though they seemed, and the porter led me straight up to my room. Throughout my stay, when I came back in from sightseeing, I returned to it with relief: third floor, five doors to the left. But on the day set for my departure, I must have got out at the wrong floor because, when I got to the room, the door was open, and a case – not mine – lay open on the bed. The cleaner was busy in the bathroom, humming, and a bored-looking young woman sat in the armchair, leafing through a magazine. ‘Isn’t this my room?’, I asked. She shrugged and said ‘I don’t know. I guess when you’ve settled up down at the desk, then you’ll be free to go’.

Kate’s Magic Egg

Her Sunday evening women visitors were favoured by being taken down to the cool sanctum of The Room to see it, her little Taj Mahal of green plastic. Its parallel grooves required good nails and careful fingers to open the top, remove the white round egg and place it in full view on the table. She’d shake it vigorously, pronouncing a form of words, and lo and behold! when she opened it again another white egg, plain to be seen!

Her niece Nora Quinn, her closest relative, had brought it from Woolworth’s in Reading in those days when you couldn’t find such magic for love nor money in our neck of the woods. And when she moved down to her yellow prefab in the village, and from there on to the County Home, where did it go to work its magic then?

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The editors invite and welcome contributions from all our readers. The content of *Oxford Magazine* relies largely on what arrives spontaneously on the editors’ desk and is usually published as received.

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Do we need a better system for student finance?

ALAN ROFF

Background

In 2012, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government introduced a new funding system for full-time undergraduates in England which sought to produce annual savings for the Exchequer of billions of pounds by making each undergraduate bear the full cost of her/his course. The savings would come at the cost of imposing a £9,000 annual fee which, after adding living costs, has led to debts of around £50,000 for each student.

Since then, there has been growing evidence of serious financial problems with the scheme and the way we fund undergraduate education in England. More recently, that concern has been compounded by a further urgent challenge as students, who have already suffered an extremely limited university experience this year despite the herculean efforts of their staff, have understandably begun to call for full or partial fee refunds. It seems timely, therefore, to evaluate how the scheme has worked out in practice.

A paper published in January 2021 by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), presents my analysis of recent reports from the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) and Office for National Statistics (ONS) which show not only that the claimed savings for the Exchequer are based on a 'fiscal illusion' but also that the scheme costs the Exchequer several billion pounds a year more than the £3,000 fee scheme it replaced. The paper looks at alternatives to the current scheme and concludes that it would be possible to remove the spectre of £50,000 debts and save money for the Exchequer by introducing a new graduate contribution scheme which would be much fairer than the current regime.

My HEPI paper therefore recommends:

- abolishing the current individualised loan scheme and the huge debts students incur;
- recognising that both individuals and society benefit from people achieving degree-level qualifications;
- continuing to allow undergraduates to study without up-front fees;
- retaining the principle that graduates should continue to make a contribution to the cost of undergraduate education;
- basing the contribution on a graduate's ability to pay as well as on political decisions about the right percentage of the pooled costs to be paid by graduate contributions; and
- possibly levying graduate contributions on those who gained their degrees in the era of grant-funded study.

I subsequently debated the proposals with David Willetts (the minister who oversaw the introduction of the

£9,000 fee in 2012) in a HEPI webinar. My paper and a recording of the webinar are available on the website hepi.ac.uk.

Rather than waiting for the Government to propose a solution to the short-term and longer-term crises affecting higher education funding, it is my view that universities, students, staff and others who care about higher education should now be debating how best to improve the current funding system. This article for the *Oxford Magazine* aims to stimulate such a debate amongst readers by summarising the findings of the HEPI paper and outlining ways in which student finance might best be organised.

Although the paper focuses primarily on long term issues, it does have very immediate implications for proposed compensation schemes for current undergraduates who have suffered so much disruption as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The article therefore ends with an analysis of two such proposals, concluding that, sadly, each would in practice be worthless to the overwhelming majority of students.

How Did We Get Here – A Recap of 2012-2021?

The 2012 scheme raised annual undergraduate fees from £3,290 to £9,000 but made government-backed loans available to cover the costs of fees and living expenses, so that undergraduates would not have to pay whilst studying. Instead, as graduates, they would make income-contingent repayments via PAYE for up to 30 years, after which any residual debt would be written off. Repayments were set at 9% of annual income in excess of a threshold (originally set at £21,000 *p.a.* but now standing at £26,400 *p.a.*).

At the time, the Government justified the massive debts being imposed on generations of students by the savings which the new scheme would produce for the Exchequer. However, economic models produced by independent analysts demonstrated that the scheme could not possibly deliver the savings which were being claimed. (After all, although raising fees hugely increased average student debt and although the scheme also significantly increased the interest payable on that debt, the level of annual repayments required of graduates was actually being *reduced* under the new scheme. So, how could these reduced repayments possibly be sufficient to produce the claimed savings?) Nevertheless, economic models cannot sway a new Government elected soon after a global financial crash. The new scheme went ahead from 2012.

How Much Does the Scheme Really Cost Graduates and the Exchequer?

Over the next seven years, governments came and went but the scheme continued and cohort after cohort of students left with huge debts. The key individuals from the 2010 policy discussions – David Cameron (PM), Nick

Clegg (Deputy PM), George Osborne (Chancellor) and David Willetts (Higher Education Minister) – had long since ceased to be MPs when, in December 2019, just after the General Election, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) put a report on its website which revealed the disastrous financial effects of the scheme.

If ever there was a time to bury bad news, this was it. However, this report – and a subsequent publication by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – fundamentally changed the way the 2012 student loan scheme for English higher education students would be treated financially. The key conclusions and figures are as follows.

- The 2012 student loan scheme is – and always has been – based on the ‘fiscal illusion’ that the loans made to students from England to pay for the £9,250 (per annum) fee and living expenses will be almost entirely repaid.
- 83% of students will never fully repay their student loans.
- Graduate repayments will cover only 38% of total costs. So, 62% of the total amount loaned will be written off by the Exchequer after 30 years. (From 2012, the National Accounts have been based on the assumption that *all* of the debt will be repaid – even though the Government’s own estimates had allowed for 30% to be written off.)
- The scheme in place prior to 2012 had resulted in 50% of costs being paid by graduates. Far from saving money for the Exchequer, the 2012 changes considerably increased the costs borne by the public purse.
- Public Sector Net Borrowing (PSNB) has been systematically understated by several billion pounds each year since 2012. By 2023/24, the corrective annual addition to Public Sector Net Borrowing will reach £15 billion and the cumulative additional cost falling on the Exchequer will reach £128 billion. (As an idea of the scale of this cost, £128 billion is close to the annual cost of the NHS.)
- The so-called ‘loans’ offered to students do not comply with the standard accounting definition of a loan which requires full repayment at maturity. Describing them as loans therefore misrepresents the Government’s true financial position. Moreover, it follows that if the so-called loans are not really loans, student debts and repayments are also misnomers.
- As 62% of the moneys advanced in loans will never be repaid, this 62% is actually a subsidy and must therefore be recognised up-front in the National Accounts. So this additional cost to the Exchequer will occur at the ‘inception’ of the loan. This means that, when so-called loans of around £16 billion are made to students each year, around £10 billion is actually a subsidy which needs to be treated as expenditure in the year in which the so-called loans are made.

Can the Current Scheme be Fixed?

The justification for the scheme is in tatters. Moreover, despite the argument often heard from apologists for the scheme that the repayment terms for graduates can be ‘tweaked’ to patch the huge financial hole which has been revealed, there is clearly no practical way of ‘fixing’ the scheme. Getting from the current 38% coverage of costs up to the originally claimed 70% coverage would require each graduate to pay on average almost twice their current level of repayments. However, this ‘average’ needs further inspection because, under the current scheme, it is impossible to increase the revenue from the richest graduates as they automatically cease to make any further repayments as soon as their individual debt is repaid. So, even if the remaining graduates doubled their repayments, the debt coverage would not approach the 70% level which proponents of the scheme claimed would be met. Even to get the 50% coverage (so that the scheme would no longer cost more than the scheme in place prior to 2012) would require an increase in the payments of lower and middle earning graduates of over 50% which they would clearly find unaffordable.

It is an inevitable consequence of basing the scheme on individualised student debt that we cannot get even 50% of costs met by affordable graduate repayments. Affordability prevents us from significantly increasing the revenue from the overwhelming majority of graduates (currently 83%) who already pay the income-contingent loan repayments for the full 30 years under the 2012 scheme; whilst the individualised nature of the debt means that those who could afford more – the highest paid graduates – cease to make a contribution after their individualised debt has been fully repaid. And if we cannot generate the income necessary to cover the same level of costs as we had before the new scheme was introduced, how can we possibly justify imposing £50,000 debts on millions of students (and indeed the existence of the Student Loan Company to collect debts which are clearly uncollectable!)?

What remains is a scheme stripped of its claim to be reducing Public Sector Net Borrowing. In reality, it has been shown by the Office for Budget Responsibility that the scheme’s true cost will have been understated in the National Accounts by £128 billion by 2023/24. It is not financially effective in that it costs the Exchequer far more than the scheme it replaced. It is not socially desirable in that it will result in an ever-growing proportion of the working population carrying debts that they and the Government know can never be repaid in full. It is not sustainable to retain a loan and debt repayment system in which loans are not loans, debts are not debts and repayments are not repayments. It is not prudent for a Government to base its funding of higher education on the officially-recognised fiscal illusion that underlies this scheme. We can and should do better than this. We need therefore to consider the options by which this might be achieved.

How to Design a New Graduate Contribution Scheme

In considering options for the future, it is important to understand the full implications of the fact that affordable graduate repayment of individualised debt is clearly

not a workable model. It is necessary, therefore, to look at alternatives which are not based on this model.

As soon as one accepts this, however, there remain only two options for funding undergraduate education.

1. To revert to the model used prior to 1998 and to fund all undergraduate education from direct or indirect taxation.
2. To accept that, while taxation will need to fund a proportion of the costs (not necessarily as high as the 62% met under the 2012 Scheme), there is a clear ethical and financial case for a graduate contribution also to meet part of the cost.

While there will be some who will argue for the taxation option, it is difficult, in the post COVID-19 environment, to see how a convincing case could be made for the full cost of undergraduate education to become a direct charge on the public purse. For 15 years, undergraduates have had to make a visible contribution to the cost of higher education. Ending this now seems highly unlikely to be seen as a top priority for public spending. The public mood is more likely to want an increase in the 38% of costs which are being met by graduates. It is likewise hard to see how leaders of UK (or English) universities, student bodies and think tanks could unite around this option. Accordingly, policy makers should focus on providing a scheme based *partly* on funding from the public purse and *partly* from securing a graduate contribution which is more transparent and more effective than the individualised debt and loan repayment approach used in the 2012 scheme.

In the light of the discussion above, it seems reasonable to set the aims of a future scheme to be:

- to produce a framework which will reduce the cost to the Exchequer;
- to eliminate the burden of debt on graduates who would otherwise be saddled with huge unrepayable loans; and
- to provide a fairer and more transparent way of handling student finance.

It is possible to demonstrate that a framework based on what might best be described as a 'graduate contribution scheme' can meet these aims. Undergraduate education would continue to be provided at no charge to the student while studying, but would thereafter require an affordable long-term contribution from each graduate to reduce the ongoing cost to the state of providing undergraduate education. The model would cease to rest on individual loans and debts but would instead pool the costs of undergraduate education and defray some of the pooled cost through income-contingent graduate contributions. The government could choose and flex the parameters which would determine the specific rate and duration of graduate contributions according to political, social and economic priorities. These would rightly be the subject of debate by the different political parties but the overall framework should be sufficiently flexible and robust to meet any outcome of such debate.

The ethical basis for a graduate contribution scheme is straightforward. It recognises that undergraduate education creates three distinct beneficiaries. The first and most obvious is the student who gains a qualification and experience which are likely to lead to significantly increased earnings and quality of life. The second is the graduate's employers (and, indeed, employers more generally) who benefit from the skills and knowledge their employees have gained from higher education (and the ability to choose from a more valuable pool of labour). The third is society more generally which benefits from the range of services provided (and higher taxes paid on average) by graduates. It therefore is reasonable to use broader individual and/or corporate taxation to fund the remaining cost of higher education (in the same way that it is used to fund the NHS and other public services) provided that the graduate also makes a contribution through a new Graduate Contribution Scheme.

Instead of seeing the contribution as a way of meeting the historic cost of his/her own higher education, we should see it as a way of ensuring that the next generation gets the opportunity to benefit from degree level study. This would replace the current concept of 'buying' a degree as a commodity with an inter-generational concept whereby those who have 'done well' from higher education support those who follow in their footsteps.

Key Elements of a Graduate Contribution Scheme

In an article designed to promote debate, it is this change of concept that lies at the heart of the argument. However, some readers may also want some idea of how a graduate contribution scheme might work in practice. The three-stage methodology to produce such a scheme is relatively simple.

1. A policy decision is needed to set the percentage of total costs which one will seek to recover from the graduate contribution.
2. It will then be necessary to set the key parameters so that the target cost percentage is achieved. These parameters will specify *eligibility* (who is liable for the contribution), *duration* (for how long payments should be made), *income threshold* (the income above which those eligible would be required to pay contributions) and the *rate* (the percentage of income in excess of the threshold at which the contribution would be calculated). One could of course make the rate parameter more complex by allowing the rate itself to be progressive in the same way that income tax rates are). For any target level of cost coverage chosen, there could be a variety of combinations of parameters which would achieve that target. So, for example, if the duration is lengthened, the rate may be reduced to produce the same cost coverage. If the eligibility is broadened, the income threshold can be increased.
3. There must then be a plan to handle the anomalies and transitional effects which will inevitably arise when moving from one scheme to another.

Parameter setting is discussed in more detail in the HEPI paper but it is perhaps worth looking at what might emerge from an informed consideration of the options for the coverage and parameters.

A starting point for the future might be to target a 50% cost recovery level which would explicitly recognise the benefit of a degree to the graduate but would also recognise the benefit to society of investing in its young people. There is nothing sacrosanct about 50% but it is a simple way of signalling through an equal share of costs that the country recognises that investment in higher education leads to benefits both for the individual and for wider society. It would also reduce the current cost to the state by several billion pounds each year below the current scheme (which requires the state to pay 62% of total costs), while recognising pragmatically that it is probably the highest level we can realistically achieve in an affordable way.

It would be essential to estimate costs extremely carefully in the light of the post COVID-19 economic situation but it should be possible to achieve the 50% target cost recovery by using a lifelong requirement for a graduate contribution and setting the rate at around 6% to 8% of income in excess of an income threshold set at the current median income. (The case for extending the duration for contributions is that the benefit which a graduate gains does not cease at retirement – although of course, for most pensioners, their much reduced income would significantly cut or eliminate their required contribution.) This would effectively use the additional revenue from the lifelong payment term for all graduates (with a particularly large benefit from higher-paid graduates who would cease to be exempt from contributing after having paid off their individualised debt) to drive down the current 9% rate while still achieving the 50% cost recovery target. The new scheme would then have reduced the annual graduate contribution rate below the current 9% level whilst also cutting the percentage of cost borne by the Exchequer from 62% to 50%.

By flexing the parameters of the scheme, it would be possible to create a more progressive variant whereby a variable contribution rate was levied so that higher earning graduates would pay a higher rate and lower earning graduates a lower rate. Conversely, one could opt for a more regressive variant, which would shift the burden of payment away from higher earners and towards lower earners if one wished to do so.

In summary, the scheme adopts an altruistic model which eliminates huge debts to produce a fairer and more transparent system for students as well as a lower cost for the Exchequer than the current individualised debt model.

Could Contributions be Shared More Fairly between Generations?

Finally, it may be worth observing that, if there were a decision to introduce a graduate contribution scheme, it would be possible to consider whether those who were given free tuition fees and maintenance grants to get their degrees (like the current author!) could reasonably be expected to pay that graduate contribution. That, at a stroke, would enable a far higher percentage of the costs of higher education courses to be met by graduate contributions than could ever feasibly have been collected under

the student loan scheme. It would also enable the costs to be shared much more fairly on an inter-generational basis.

If, for example, detailed analysis found that a broadly based graduate contribution based on 5% of income over the median would cover half the total cost of the provision of higher education, leaving the remainder to be met by general taxation, would this be an attractive post COVID-19 option? It would certainly reflect a fairer intergenerational distribution of costs than anything yet seen in the 21st century. However, this is rightly a matter for governments and interest groups to debate and determine. The graduate contribution framework at least makes that debate possible without needing to buy into huge debts or fiscal illusions. Surely, that must be a more attractive proposition than the *status quo*?

Compensating Current Students for COVID-19

As a footnote, it is timely to end by reflecting on the implications of the findings of OBR on the campaign for fee refunds or interest holidays currently being proposed for undergraduates so badly affected by Covid-19. Such consideration looks solely at practicalities as this is not the place to attempt to judge the merits of the case for compensation.

One argument that has been canvassed is for a fee waiver of £6,000 for 2020/21. If Government decided to do this, it would reduce the overall loan (and therefore, the debt) of each student affected by £6,000. However, even after taking account of that resultant lower loan, it would still be the case that well over 75% of students would not fully repay their student debt before the 30-year Government write-off took place. So, for at least 75% of students, the only effect of a fee waiver would be to have a slightly lower residual debt written off after 30 years. As their loan repayments are income-contingent, their repayments would remain completely unaffected by such a waiver. The only beneficiaries would be the small group consisting of the highest-paid graduates (those who go on to earn at least £100,000 *p.a.* at current prices) who would find their debts cleared more quickly.

Sadly, the alternative proposal from seven Vice-Chancellors to cut the interest rates on loans would only benefit the same small group. For over 75% of graduates, the interest rate cut would again merely cut the amount of their debt which is written off after 30 years. Their annual repayments would again remain completely unaffected.

If the Government really wants to compensate students, it must either pay compensation directly to the students now (rather than reducing their so-called debts) or must decrease the repayments expected of them after graduation (by either increasing the income threshold at which repayments become due or reducing the 9% rate at which repayments are collected).

The author would very much welcome comments and thoughts on the article and/or the issue of student finance. Please send to alanroff@hotmail.com

Free Speech Policy

– and the importance of the secret vote

ARIF AHMED

In March 2020 Cambridge University Council proposed a new ‘free speech policy’ featuring this passage:

“In exercising their right to freedom of expression, the University expects its staff, students and visitors to be respectful of the differing opinions of others, in line with the University’s core value of freedom of expression. The University also expects its staff, students and visitors to be respectful of the diverse identities of others, in line with the University’s core value of freedom from discrimination.”

I found this wording completely unacceptable.

First, its plain meaning was directly repressive. ‘Respect’ implies appreciation or admiration; it rules out giving offence.¹ But lecturers, students, et al. should not respect patently false opinions concerning, e.g. vaccination or climate change. Nor should the University demand respect for all political or religious identities, from white nationalism to Islamic fundamentalism.

Second, its penumbral meaning was indirectly repressive. Many political, philosophical and scientific views are arguably ‘disrespectful’ of the ‘differing opinions’ or ‘diverse identities’ of someone or other. UK universities have recently conducted lengthy and confrontational investigations into, or taken disciplinary action against, expressions of belief including support for Palestinian rights² and for gender-critical feminism.³ In one case more than 500 students petitioned Oxford University to force two Professors to include trans women in their research into women’s equality, so as not to create a ‘hostile and exclusionary atmosphere’.⁴ One could easily imagine a public commitment to ‘respect’ for ‘identities’ being invoked to create similar pressure in Cambridge. One could even more easily imagine risk-averse staff and students (which in this climate means everyone) just not saying anything controversial in case that *might* happen.

At a University discussion in June I therefore proposed amendments which among other things replaced ‘respect’ with ‘tolerance’.⁵ ‘Tolerance’ is more sharp-edged. It means willingness to accept behaviour and beliefs that are different from your own even if you disagree with them.⁶ Research or speech that simply *accepts the existence* of a belief or identity thus counts as tolerant of it. The amendments therefore placed no limits at all (beyond the law) on what staff and students could say or write, or on what beliefs they might assert, propose or question, or on the terms in which they might do these things.

Other aspects of the University Council’s original proposals were also of concern and were amended. A second amendment made it harder to cancel invitations to controversial speakers. And for the third: the original proposals gave the University scope to stop a speaker event whenever it liked and on any grounds at all; the amended version instead briefly enumerated very limited grounds that matched those stated in the well-known ‘Chicago Principles’.⁷

In September the University Council responded briefly.⁸ It rejected all three amendments and insisted on pushing through its original policy without offering a vote. A handful of us therefore tried to gather the 25 signatures necessary to force a vote of all senior academic staff (the Regent House). Eventually we succeeded, and the Council scheduled the ballot for 27 November–8 December.

Our task in the campaign was simply to present our arguments to as many colleagues as possible. My colleagues Prof. Ross Anderson (Churchill) and Dr Julius Grower (Jesus) both made extraordinarily successful efforts in that direction. But the arguments themselves—which I have already outlined—were not elaborate. Nor did they need to be. In *private* conversations many academics—I noticed especially those in law and the physical sciences—were quick to see, and then to find it alarming, (a) that the vagueness of ‘respect’, ‘identity’, etc. offered endless scope for abuse; and (b) that by demanding ‘respect’ the proposed code policed not only our speech but also our minds, as Stephen Fry pointed out in the *Sunday Times* just after voting opened.⁹

We were also fortunate to get wide publicity outside Cambridge—again thanks to Prof. Anderson—and therefore also wide public support. The *FT*,¹⁰ the *Index on Censorship*¹¹ and the Cambridge Radical Feminist Network¹² all supported us in public, as did a Nobel laureate (Sir Greg Winter), a former Astronomer Royal (Lord Rees), a former Ambassador (Paul Collis), Prof. Richard Dawkins and the Minister of State for Universities.¹³

The arguments *against* our amendments were hard to identify. I heard two at a debate at the local UCU. The first was that the amendments curtailed students’ right to protest. The second, broader, point was that there is no ‘free speech problem’: the British government, on this view, has simply invented it to distract everyone from its mishandling of other things.

The first argument is mystifying. Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights protects the right to protest, for students or anyone else.¹⁴ None of my amendments came within a mile of threatening that. Who could have dreamt otherwise? The second amendment does rule out one kind of protest: namely, protesting at someone else’s speech by stopping them from saying anything at all. But anyone who regards shutting people up as a legitimate response to their arguments has no place in our higher education system.

The second argument betrays quite a lot of ignorance. Cambridge University had itself just recently adopted the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism.¹⁵ This ‘definition’ is, in my opinion, really nothing of the kind: in the vagueness of its language and in the sweeping range of its appended examples it evidently and effectively discourages all manner of expression in defence of Palestinian rights. As such it threatens to chill free speech on a matter of the first impor-

tance: an effect against which a robust free speech policy might offer some protection. How on earth could the local UCU pretend that there was no problem?

Or look at this site,¹⁶ where feminist scholars testify to facing abuse, investigation, or worse, just for raising questions about sex and gender. One writes:

"I see colleagues explain how a person with short hair must be non-binary (no such thing as a woman with short hair!) and don't understand how they don't see how regressive this is. I doubt myself on a regular basis. Is it just me? Am I going mad? I am on a fixed term contract and feel totally helpless to speak out or even question how things are."

Another:

"We have been asked at [a redbrick university] to write our preferred pronouns on our email signatures. I really don't want anyone to define me or even be considering my gender, it feels deeply regressive. I know if I take a stand I will probably get sacked or something. It feels really sinister."

If you think that free speech in universities is not a problem, do you think that these lecturers, and the hundreds like them with similar stories—many of them very junior, or on short-term contracts, or precariously employed—are all lying, or mad? Or do you just not care? Whatever the reason, Cambridge UCU clearly felt no concern, for it instructed its several thousand local members to support the University proposals over ours.

Fortunately they and almost everyone else just ignored it, because at the actual vote, amidst a very high turnout, the result was about 4 to 1 for our amendments.¹⁷ In consequence Cambridge's policy now offers strong and clear protection to the speech of academics, staff, students and visitors.¹⁸

The result was widely welcomed, including by the Secretary of State for Education, who wrote: 'More than a victory for common sense, it touches something far deeper. Freedom of speech, thought or expression is one of the most prized aspects of a civilised society... To appreciate how precious freedom of speech is, listen to those who have been denied it.'¹⁹ And since then the Government has gone further, publishing a White Paper on academic freedom setting out (among other things) guidance on University speech codes that consciously incorporates the spirit and some of the wording of the Cambridge amendments.²⁰

* * *

I think the whole episode sheds light in many directions. By way of conclusion I'll briefly mention one. In March 2020, when the University first proposed this policy, I couldn't find anyone willing to challenge it in public. Not because they all had other things to think about (though of course at that time everyone did) but because they *feared the consequences*.

The same thing happened when I and a few colleagues tried to gather signatures to force a vote. You would have thought 25 signatures would not be difficult to extract from more than 4000 dons; but again, I asked probably 50 people who said that they supported me in private but felt afraid to do so in public. They were planning to apply for promotion, or for a grant, or their head of depart-

ment might be hostile, or their colleagues might ostracize them...

You see it in meetings too. Everyone here knows what I mean. Some meddlesome but trendy reform gets proposed by the departmental ideologues; it is tiresome nonsense; everyone knows that it is nonsense; everyone knows that everyone *knows* that it is nonsense ... and yet nobody speaks or votes against it, it goes through, and the darkness thickens. Why don't you speak or vote against it?—because you are afraid that nobody else will, and you will end up isolated, and you are on a temporary contract... If you had left Cambridge as a student in, say, 2011 and returned to academic life here today, you would be astonished and depressed at the rapidity with which, and the extent to which, fear has now penetrated people's minds.

Academic tenure was supposed to safeguard against this emperor's-new-clothes type of situation. That protection has long gone, but another one, which the recent vote illustrates, is the secret ballot. Many more academics were prepared to vote against the Council than to speak against it; and I suspect something analogous is true of almost any question where being loudly on one side is a form of virtue-signalling. Secret voting disconnects virtue-signalling from decision-making: the only thing you have any incentive to express on a *secret* ballot is your honest opinion. It therefore constitutes a vital procedural protection for any institution—a College, a Faculty, a Department or a whole University—whose decision-making processes depend on the sincerity and independent-mindedness of its members. It ought to be the norm at every level.

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/respect>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/28/uk-students-face-disciplinary-action-over-bds-protest/>

³ <https://medium.com/@kathleenstock/are-academics-freely-able-to-criticise-the-idea-of-gender-identity-in-uk-universities-67b97c6e04be>

⁴ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-uEcZBwCyIYqn1EF12Y2U-uYGuFhOkBi8kaFkDEpkVWU/edit>

⁵ <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2019-20/weekly/6585/section3.shtml#heading2-8>

⁶ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tolerance>

⁷ <https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2020-21/weekly/6589/section1.shtml#heading2-9>

⁹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/stephen-fry-joins-chorus-criticising-cambridge-free-speech-policy-lsbd5nq5f>

¹⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/9ef845be-df73-48a9-a938-d802e5f7129d?sharetype=blocked>

¹¹ <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2020/12/should-we-have-to-respect-or-just-tolerate-aborrent-views/>

¹² <https://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~rja14/Papers/radfem-24nov2020.pdf>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/michelledonelan/status/1332382826092769280>

¹⁴ https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/the-university-of-cambridge-has-formally-adopted-the-ibra-definition-of-antisemitism>

¹⁶ <https://www.gcacademianetwork.org/>

¹⁷ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/statement-on-freedom-of-speech-regent-house-ballot>

¹⁸ <https://www.governanceandcompliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/governance-and-strategy/university-statement-freedom-speech>

¹⁹ <https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/12/11/freedom-of-speech-is-one-of-those-fundamentals-that-universities-are-looked-towards-to-uphold-and-protect-the-education-secretary-on-the-importance-of-free-speech/>

²⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/961536/Higher_education_free_speech_and_academic_freedom.pdf

A Student View

SOPHIE WATSON

THE free speech policy that my University tried to push through last year was subject to a great deal of scrutiny in its final weeks, both within academia and in the national press. Its flaws are therefore well-documented, and I will not pick over them here. Suffice it to say they were troubling enough that when University staff voted overwhelmingly to amend them it came as a very welcome victory, in a year otherwise replete with reasons for gloom.

At the same time, my interactions with other undergraduates before, during, and after the ballot have left me with a rather bleak view of the free speech situation in universities. At first, I had assumed that support for the policy among some of my peers (not to mention the academics who teach us) was rooted in a kind of understandable if dangerous complacency about freedom of speech. I now realise that it reflected something far more concerning: not just a failure to be on one's guard against the erosion of free speech, but (in some cases) a feeling of genuine distrust and antipathy towards it.

This may seem overly pessimistic, given that just 162 votes were cast in favour of the policy in its original problematic form, and over 1300 were cast for Dr. Ahmed's amendments. In hindsight it seems obvious that Cambridge academics would vote (and overwhelmingly so) in favour of a free speech policy which is fit for purpose. It almost seems impossible that it could have been otherwise. Yet, before the ballot, those of us campaigning for the amendments were not so sanguine. The Cambridge chapter of the UCU had passed a motion advising its members to accept the policy proposed last year by the University – apparently on the basis that the amendments impinge on the 'right' of students to no-platform speakers we disagree with. An open letter organised by the University's nascent free speech society *Libertas*, meanwhile, received only 173 signatures – a significant minority of which were from alumni who had matriculated in the 1970s.

As the week of the ballot approached, I became increasingly aware that being 'for' free speech is not the uncontroversial political opinion I had always believed it to be. At first I supposed that the discomfort I felt when raising the topic was because it is frankly difficult to talk about 'liberal values' and 'freedom of speech' in social settings without sounding pompous; any degree of earnestness about such things is unfashionable in student politics at any rate. The 'deconstruction' and 'problematization' of established concepts, a contemptuous cynicism about them (and the motives of their supporters), is rather the order of the day. In hindsight, I think I understand my

discomfort and the discomfort of my peers a little better now. These experiences have led me to make several observations about Cambridge student politics that might explain why supporting free speech can be a controversial position for a student to take, and I offer them below.

(i) *A basic misunderstanding of what free speech protections entail.*

In one 'discussion' (which, I am ashamed to say, quickly devolved into a row) a fellow student asked me if I thought someone should be able to verbally abuse their co-workers with impunity. When I said No, she interpreted this as a 'gotcha' moment – "so you do believe that there should be limits to free speech!" I do, indeed; incitement to violence is another example. But an academic I disagree with giving a talk (or indeed a Professor of modern history giving the lectures she is contracted to give) constitutes neither harassment nor violence. The fact that otherwise clever people cannot always tell the difference between these two situations is telling, in my opinion.

(ii) *"Free speech" is a right-wing dogwhistle.*

This amounts to the belief (common among students) that the free speech debate is not 'really' about free speech. Those who argue in its favour are not concerned about free speech, we are concerned that we will no longer be able to express our bigoted views without consequences. To this we may say "No, we're not", and they may reply "Yes, you are" – and moreover that we are constitutionally incapable of recognising our own ulterior motives, since they stem from unconscious bias. It does not matter whether you are a white heterosexual man or a lesbian feminist of colour. No one is exempt from this possible reading of their motivations and support for free speech is in itself grounds for being suspicious of them.

(iii) *There is no such thing as a nonpartisan idea.*

Since becoming visibly involved with the Cambridge Radical Feminist Network, I have lost count of the number of female students to contact me privately in support of my (surprisingly controversial) view that sexism has something to do with the material reality of sex. All of them made it clear that they could not express this belief

in public for fear of social exclusion. This should illustrate the attitude currently held by our student body towards divergent views. It is impossible to express an opinion which is not then taken as proof that you are either left-wing or right-wing, progressive or regressive, good or evil. Similarly, it is impossible for any idea or value to avoid this kind of political categorisation. Since free speech is increasingly associated with the political right, it is a kind of social suicide for a student who moves in left-wing circles to defend it.

In practice, all this translates to a student body primed to be suspicious (even openly hostile) towards the notion of free speech. It is worth remembering that it was University staff, not students, who voted overwhelmingly in favour of revising the University's earlier formulation. This

is not the whole story, of course – the recent establishment of a free speech society at Cambridge (with members from across the political spectrum) reflects the dissatisfaction of students with this kind of thinking.

When the Cambridge Radical Feminist Network was founded in 2016, the female students responsible were motivated partially by concerns about free speech; and the women of Oxford University are beginning to organise as well. There is every reason to be optimistic about the future of free speech on campus but there is also every reason to be concerned. If we fail to recognise the distrust towards free speech that prevails in student spaces, it can never be addressed – in which case, I am not optimistic that the results of the next ballot on the subject will be as favourable as the last.

Afternoon Tea in a Time of Horror and Chaos

Lightning claws open a sky
milky
like an offered bowl

diminishing the garden's peacock
to a flash of tail-feather
framed by stained-glass doors.

Ignore each strike embellishing
and dimming the room,
making the china stutter.

Cut into sponge
doused with syrup,
tease apart sticky dates.

Sip, swallow,
as hammering rain
darkens the flagstones.

When the maid offers
to lower the blinds, say
no, there is no need. Say

*plump the cushions
at my back, please.* Call
for a fresh jug of cream.

Inspector Morse Extra, 1989

On screen for just seven minutes:
I am kissed in an Aston Martin Lagonda
under cherry boughs, wood-pigeon calling,

my strapless taffeta gown a poison green.
I'm squired by a ruffle-haired man in a tux,
Tobias? or Lucian? –

perhaps Felix.
My boarding school motto
inscribed on my signet ring:

Fidelis in Parvo.
I have high cheekbones,
hopes of a First. My body

is found two days later:
dragonfly sheen of my sodden dress,
crushed netting between my legs.

Adrift, rolling in the mossy light
under the arches of the Isis,
fingernails full

of the dirt beneath:
o my drowned brain

a colosseum emptying
of all its trapped animals.

SARAH STEWART

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‘Turf Wars’ in Oxford

– Lampposts, Public Space and Transmisogyny

MHAIRI MONTGOMERY

WALKING through Oxford city centre between late 2019 and early 2020, one might have noticed the abundance of blue, pink and white stickers on various lampposts, electricity cases and phone boxes espousing messages of trans happiness and solidarity.¹ However, though the streets of central Oxford now stand testament to the city’s broad community of transgender folk and allies, these trans-positive stickers and graffiti did not emerge out of nowhere. Rather, they formed a concerted response to a slew of transphobic stickers which were put up in the city for a few months in the spring of 2019. Similar transphobic stickers have also been found in London and Manchester, though not to the same extent as in Oxford.

The peak of this transphobic stickering campaign saw stickers pasted around the city centre twice a day, seemingly on a set route. Stickers were put up in the mornings, soon removed by activists and allies, and reappeared again in the evenings when they were again removed (anon, 2019). According to police estimates, ‘hundreds, possibly thousands’ of transphobic stickers were stuck up around Oxford between March and October 2019 (Lyons, 2020). The two ‘sides’ defaced, removed, and scribbled over one another’s stickers in a silent struggle to curate the politics of the city centre’s street media. By the time I arrived in Oxford in late 2019, the transpositive stickering campaign had gained force and the transphobic stickers seemed to have petered out, ending with an outpouring of transpositivity.

The transphobic stickers tacitly targeted trans women in ways that might go overlooked by those unfamiliar with the discourse of denial and exclusion these women often face. Stickers reading “get the ‘T’ out” (referring to the ‘T’ for ‘Trans’ in LGBT) echo the demands of a separatist group of lesbians who refuse to share their politics with trans folk. Others included phrases such as “real women don’t have penises”, echoing a rhetoric that disregards the performative and social nature of gender. The category of ‘women’ itself tries and fails to describe what Brown (2008, p.22) describes as an incoherent, ‘uncircumscribable’ subject. This subjecthood has been discursively withheld from or extended to certain groups depending on race and class throughout Western history. Furthermore, ‘woman’ as descriptor fails to fully encapsulate the biological, social, and cultural experiences of every person that it claims to represent. Nor can genitalia and chromosomes be categorised into two discrete groups; in my view, our inclination to take these as the be-all and end-all of gendered and sexed identity is a cultural phenomenon rather than a biologically sound one (see, for example, Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Moore, 2002).²

Policing Gender

It is undeniable that transphobia – and transmisogyny in particular – remains rife in the United Kingdom. A history of violence and harassment against trans folk serves as further context for these stickers, so that they necessarily carry an implicit threat of something more sinister. Many trans women will be all too familiar with the bouts of outrage that follow the presence of their bodies in certain spaces, and at its most dangerous such vitriol may manifest in physical assault. Talia Mae Bettcher (2014, *passim*) argues that society’s obsession with genitalia sometimes culminates in what she calls ‘reality enforcement’, that is, violent attempts to publicly prove (verbally, physically, or otherwise) that someone’s gender does not conform to the one they were assigned at birth. According to a survey carried out by YouGov and Stonewall in 2017 (Bachmann and Gooch, 2017, p6)*, 41% of trans people had experienced a hate crime or incident as a result of their gender identity in the previous year alone.

Trans scholars such as Petra Doan and Vivian Namaste have written about the ways that public space is often governed by gendered norms. Doan (2010) describes such spaces as governed by a ‘tyranny of gender’, which is characterised by a determination to erase gender variance and enforce strict conformity to these gendered norms. Namaste (2000, p.140) points out that Western tendencies to conflate gender identity with sexuality blurs the lines between trans- and homo-phobic violence. Some trans men, for example, might be perceived as ‘overly’ feminine men and thus presumed to be gay and subjected to homophobic attacks, whilst some butch cis women might face transphobic violence (*ibid.*, p.146).

What are the end goals of such attempts to police gender? If this is an attempt to ‘straighten’ out public space and erase any vestige of gender-based or sexual variance, is the end goal to deter visibly trans and/or gender variant folk from accessing public space?

An analysis of the transphobic stickers in Oxford provides some answers for this particular case. The stickers’ messages attacked trans women, and trans women also appear to have been their target audience. By this, I mean that the stickering campaign was not necessarily an attempt to recruit potentially like-minded people, but rather to (at the very least) make trans women feel uncomfortable. Similar stickers can sometimes be found in women’s public toilets; in this semi-private yet currently very publicly contested space, such messages can be understood as an attempt to deter trans women from using the facilities. They contain the threat of vigilante violence, that is, confrontation and expulsion from the premises. What does it mean, then, when such stickers appear in the streets, and how does this tie in to broader discourses and histories of gendered use of public spaces?

Kate Manne (2018) distinguishes between what she calls a 'naïve' definition of misogyny and a 'positive' understanding of misogyny. A 'naïve' conception relies on the figure of the misogynist, that is, a character who hates women *qua* women and who is deeply psychologically invested in this hatred. Manne argues that such a characterisation does not adequately describe the hostility which certain women face, nor the circumstances through which this comes about. Ascribing this hostility to a character trait or psychological problem fails to acknowledge the local patriarchal circumstances from which it probably stems.

Manne suggests that the 'positive' definition is a more productive way to identify misogyny. In this regard, misogyny emerges as 'a property of social environments in which women are liable to encounter hostility due to the enforcement and policing of patriarchal norms and expectations' (2018, p.19). In this sense, then, misogyny 'functions to enforce and police women's subordination and to uphold male dominance' (*ibid.*). Manne's definition of misogyny seems reminiscent of Doan's 'tyranny of gender', and ultimately they both refer back to the same thing; that is, the affective slippage between normativity and morality that sees the enforcement of norms imbued with a sense of moral righteousness in correcting what is perceived as deviance.

Misogyny has long coloured women's relationships with public urban space in the West. Victorian politics of respectability moderated women's access to the streets along highly classed and gendered lines, and infrastructure such as public toilets was also developed and installed according to the notion of public space as an overwhelmingly male domain. Today women's experience of urban space remains coloured. Gill Valentine (1989, p.386) has shown that women tend to map spaces along a continuum from 'dangerous' to 'safe' depending on time and location. She argues that male violence against women has become conceptually tied up with certain geographical spaces, so that aggression is expected to occur at certain times and places – or at least is not surprising if it does (*ibid.*, p.385). This line of reasoning lends itself easily to victim-blaming, that is, suggesting that a woman is somehow responsible for her assault if she enters a place deemed 'dangerous' or at a 'risky' time and thus supposedly tempts fate (*ibid.*). One might also consider certain catcalls, stalking, and familiar warnings of strangers in dark alleyways as substantiating patriarchal dominance over urban space.

Transmisogyny, then, is an extension of this, in that it targets *trans* women specifically. The stickers can be read as an attempt to enforce the 'tyranny of gender', but the fact that the stickers target *trans* women rather than *trans* men reveals a specific desire to remove certain types of feminine bodies – that is, certain women – from the streets. These stickers constitute, in Manne's terms, a 'property of a social environment which makes women more liable to encounter hostility'; their aim was clearly to make *trans* women feel uncomfortable in public space.³

A Final Note

In these times of lockdown in particular, I think we are all now more than ever aware of the value we place on being able to go outside and move around our locales unimpeded. If anything, this to me further highlights the violation implicit in attempts to restrict access to public space in the way I have described here and reveals the moral importance of creating an urban environment which is accessible to all.

¹ Some of the activists responsible for these transpositive stickers have been documenting their role in removing transphobic stickers and creating and putting up transpositive ones. The Instagram account @transhappinessisreal in particular resists common portrayals of *trans* folk as tragedies and spreads transpositive messages that assert *trans* happiness. Similarly, the twitter account @stickersftw and its corresponding Imgur blog (anon, 2019) has been documenting the removal of transphobic stickers from the start. The blog documents an individual's attempts to remove transmisogynistic stickers and replace them with colourful messages supporting *trans* folk and opposing transphobia, whilst the twitter account posts a mixture of local and national information about *trans* rights and continues to document transpositive stickers.

² Here, then, my use of the term 'woman' is informed by de Beauvoir's ((1949) 2011, p.283) infamous statement that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman,' in that I understand the concept of woman as a heuristic, socio-culturally constructed category through which we perceive ourselves and others, and through which we in turn are perceived by others. The experience of being a 'woman' is therefore on the one hand highly subjective and on the other very much informed by existing and localised patriarchal and heteronormative structures which serve to uphold the gender binary and gender inequality.

³ According to these stickers, then, *trans* women should only access public space in the guise of men. In this case, transmisogyny functions to sanction visibly masculine access to public space – in that it demands *trans* women discard any vestige of femininity and instead try to act as cis men – whilst refusing these women this privilege, thus continuing a long history of denying women access to the public sphere. A particular irony emerges here in that it is also often (trans-exclusionary) feminist groups that end up perpetuating this.

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Nothing Paradoxical

PETER OPPENHEIMER

BERATING, as they put it, “for the umpteenth time” the secretive and dictatorial governance to which the University has been gradually subjected over the past twenty years, the Editors of *Oxford Magazine* (No.429, Fifth Week, Hilary Term 2021) observe a seeming “paradox” drawn to their attention by Gill Evans. Namely, that “the making available...of the minutes of the Silver and Bronze groups responsible for formulating policy during Covid is a model of openness, allowing staff to find out what the committees are doing in a reasonable amount of detail.”

There is nothing whatever “paradoxical” here. The explanation is perfectly simple. In order to deal with Covid, democratic fundamentals have been in partial abeyance across the country at large. Compliance has been the order of the day. And the circumstance is *a fortiori* exploitable within the University. Oxford’s ruling hierarchy has been able simply to issue instructions, discarding at least experimentally the tedious pretence of serving a democratic or grass-roots consensus.

By the same token, the interesting question is whether the hierarchy will feel able, when Covid is past, to drop the mask once and for all. Or will it resume paying lip service to democratic principles, even while in practice making sure to ignore or subvert them? The few members of the academic community who watched (remotely) the “Open Forum” in mid-February of the Vice-Chancellor and associates could hardly fail to notice the casual and cliqueish tone of the proceedings, redolent of underlying disrespect for institutional formalities—addressing, for example, even the Vice-Chancellor by her first name rather than by the title of her office.

The counterpart on the side of the academic community is a widespread feeling of alienation from the central authorities, who are viewed as gang bosses or usurpers, not as partners or support staff in a joint enterprise. Unsurprisingly, those who find themselves having to operate across the divide find it shocking—the epithet is not mine, but that of a recent Junior Proctor writing to OM No.429—and are driven to plead for reconciliation. In her letter Sophie Marnette of Balliol expresses justified pride in the historical legacy of the Proctorship as Tribune of the People and as a guiding light for Council on behalf of Congregation. All the more regrettable is it (and whether Marnette herself recognises the point is unclear) that this, formerly central, role of the Proctorial position stands currently as a hollow anachronism—quite simply, because Council and Congregation are themselves little more than concentric rubber stamps for the central administrative structure which dominates and hamstringing them.

More than one Senior Proctor in recent years has, for example, criticised the University’s extravagant outlay on buildings, a matter waved aside by the central hierarchy as so much hot air. Duly on its way is the most reprehensible extravagance to date, in the form of the Schwarzman so-called Centre for the Humanities.

Sophie Marnette in her turn urges greater academic participation in University governance, whether by standing for election to University committees or merely by exercising votes. Undoubtedly the University’s governance needs to be put back into academic hands. But regrettably this will not be achieved by adding academic underlings to existing bodies—especially not, if such positions are seen as providing early-career opportunities for aspiring bureaucratic overlords. More fundamental changes are required. The primary need is to abolish the top-down appointment of Executive Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Heads of Division and their staffs, replacing them with much smaller delegate bodies nominated from the grass roots by Faculty Boards. This would also save significant expense. Unfortunately, its realisation depends, if not on external authority, then certainly on Congregation exercising that very sovereignty which to-day’s bureaucratic overlords are bent (in their own interests) on neutralising or crippling.

Mention of external authority makes it worth considering just briefly the possible relevance to all this of Whitehall Departments and the Office for Students. Mid-February saw dispatched a letter of “Guidance” from the Secretary of State for Education to the OfS, the latter being scheduled on April Fool’s Day to acquire a youthful new Chair in the person of Lord Wharton of Yarm. In the S of S’s summary words, “The policy areas included in this guidance reflect my strong view that the OfS should focus on driving up quality, being risk based, minimising bureaucracy, and ensuring that it delivers on equality of opportunity in higher education.”

In any document of this kind, high-sounding declarations of principle need to be distinguished from more modest practicalities, not least when compromises are necessary between principles that clash. Thus, the emphasis on quality in higher education and on a “risk-based” approach refers primarily to regulation of *minimum* standards across the sector and not, for example, to the blatant “levelling down” under internal administrative pressure that has taken place in Oxford degree standards in the twenty-first century.

Ironically, the Secretary of State’s letter explicitly links “risk-based regulation” with the objective of reduc-

ing bureaucratic impositions on leading universities: “I would like the OfS to implement a markedly more risk-based model of regulation, with significant, meaningful and observable reductions in the regulatory burden upon high quality providers within the next twelve months.” If

the OfS’s regulatory scope were of an all-round nature, Oxford’s academic community would be entitled to demand a prompt reduction of at least 10 per cent in central administrative staff numbers. Some hopes.

Monument

A stone among stones—
think of yourself
indifferent, unsoaked.

The centuries may show
that rain, like time, wears away,
seeps in.

I envy your resistance, your quiet
instinct, that you look past
each droplet.

The Salt Will Heal

What wounds would sew themselves in salt?
She thinks of lonely ships, haggard lines
cast, cages sunk, a mackerel slit
on the kitchen table, a hissing pot.
She draws a breath and bows her head
beneath the waves, lungs tight
in the white noise until
her voice knows the water.

Construction

A man on his own time, he builds
melodies in the still-cold morning,
his fluorescent vest scaling metal
skeletons, like a lonely little sunrise.

Hours before the clangour arrives,
the heavy-tyres and swinging crane,
he pours tea from a thermos, unpacks
his sandwiches, lets the day sink in.

There’s fullness in silence and his breath
takes shape. His feet don’t touch the concrete
of a working day, but swing like a boy’s
in a playground. Soon, his shift will begin

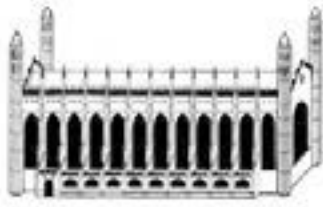
but he waits for the birds, then descends
between two slats of deepening light.
Grounded, chiselled, his construction
is everything, and it blots out the horizon.

RUSSELL JONES

Russell Jones is an Edinburgh-based writer and editor. He has published six poetry collections and two novels, and edited three poetry anthologies. He was the UK’s first Pet Poet Laureate and has a PhD in Creative Writing (Poetry) from the University of Edinburgh.

NOTICE

Jane Griffiths, literary editor of the *Oxford Magazine*, will be pleased to read literary submissions of any description—e.g. verse, critical prose, very short stories, segments of dialogue, reviews of new dramatic productions and books, etc. Submissions should be no longer than 750 words, and where possible should be sent by email attachment to jane.griffiths@ell.ox.ac.uk together with a two-sentence biog.



Notes from Cambridge

THREE controversies of note in Cambridge coming to the boil in the second half of this term seem to be indicators of the health of its governance, exemplifying as they do the way its constitutional checks and balances work or are put under strain.

A speedy U-turn

The result of speeches made in the Discussion of 9 February¹ of the *Supplementary Report of the Board of Scrutiny*, published on 27 January, has been a speedy U-turn.² This, its second Report of the academic year, was needed, as the Board explained, because the Council had not been able to publish its final annual *Report on Allocations from the Chest*, but only a provisional one last summer in the ‘exceptional circumstances of the Covid-10 pandemic. Now that it had done so, the Board was responding.

The Council’s prediction in its provisional Allocations Report of 24 June had been that ‘the financial implications under any scenario are significantly detrimental, causing the collegiate University a reduction in cash-flow of several hundreds of millions of pounds.’ The Board noted that it was now clear that ‘the measurable direct net financial impact on the Chest so far seems to have been negligible’. So, the Board suggested:

‘The suspension of almost all reward and progression schemes, including Academic Career Pathways (previously the Senior Academic Promotions process) in 2020–21 is exceptionally disappointing to many, particularly as this was justified, in part, by the pandemic.’

All the succeeding speeches after the introductory remarks by the Chair of the Board—including strongly-worded joint remarks made on behalf of UCU and CUSU—called for this suspension to be lifted.

The Reporter of 24 February included a Notice:

‘Re-introduction of reward and progression schemes in 2021–22

In Easter Term 2020, as a result of the financial impact of Covid-19, the Council agreed to certain pay restraint measures for the 2020–21 academic year (Reporter, 6587, 2019–20, p. 542). These included the suspension of all but one part of the reward and progression schemes for that year only.

The Council has kept the pay restraint measures under review. It has now approved the re-introduction of all reward and progression schemes for the 2021–22 academic year, in accordance with their usual implementation cycles.’

So there has been no admission of having made a mistake, but a significant and speedy response to justified Regent House indignation and an adroit corrective illustrating the important role in governance of the Board of Scrutiny.

A merger for financial rather than academic reasons?

The second controversy testing the constitutional checks and balances arises from the proposal to merge Cambridge University Press with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (renamed Cambridge Assessment from 2004). This was published at a late stage in the *Reporter* of 24 February.³

It will be remembered that UCLES has quite a record of swallowing things up. It absorbed the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations (dating from 1857), and then the joint Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board (dating from 1873)). It has gulped down a good many other examination boards, including that of the RSA, with which it (with Oxford) formed OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations). Its financial statements indicate that its operating accounts are considerably larger than those of the Press. So the first question must be whether this is going to be a marriage of equals or whether it is going to swallow up the Press too.

At its meeting on 19 October the Cambridge Council ‘endorsed’ a joint proposal from the Syndicate of the Cambridge University Press (the counterpart of the OUP’s even older body of Delegates) and what is still the Syndicate of UCLES. The proposal was introduced by the Chief Financial Officer. He said the new entity:

‘would address the growing desire from learners, teachers and researchers to engage with Cambridge’s digital output in a joined-up way. It would also be better equipped to fulfil the global demand for innovative products and services that combine expertise in learning and assessment and to move more quickly and effectively to develop and market these products and services.’

The Council:

‘endorsed the Syndicates’ approval of the operational merger of both organisations under a unified management team from 1 August 2021, (Minute 402).’

No detailed discussion at that meeting is reported, though the Minutes says the Council was happy to ‘endorse’ the proposal with its details in an unfinished state. It:

‘noted that the name of the merged organisation was yet to be determined and that proposals for subsequent changes to the Statutes and Ordinances would return to the Council in due course.’

This was taken to be final approval. It was excitedly announced the next day that:

‘the new organisation will have the capabilities to provide world leading assessment, learning and academic research offerings globally, under the Cambridge brand.’⁴

There had been previous mention at the Council meeting of 21 September under Matters Arising (Minute 388), suggesting indeed that this merger plan was driven primarily by financial considerations:

‘the financial performance of Press and Assessment continued to be well below previous forecasts, and the competition had been innovating fast, meaning that there was even greater impetus needed in delivering the “single strategy” and continuing the investment in digital products.’

At the meeting of 18 May under a heading COVID-19 Crisis Management and Future Opportunities the proposal was again presented from a financial point of view:

‘The Chief Financial Officer cautioned that the analysis was preliminary, particularly in respect of longer term cashflows for Cambridge Assessment and Cambridge University Press due to uncertainty about the evolution of the markets. Further analysis would follow including: the identification of a “base case” scenario; the refinement of key assumptions, following work by the Recovery Task Force and the Press & Assessment Board; risks and opportunities in philanthropy; and the potential for new revenue streams and efficiencies from digital working (Minute 349).’

Oxford’s University Press, under its Statute VIII, is, like CUP and Cambridge Assessment, a Department of the University.⁵ It is in a position to contribute substantially to the University’s annual income. The CUP’s Annual Report on its finances suggest it is too,⁶ as is Cambridge Assessment.⁷ It is intended that the new Cambridge entity ‘shall pay over to the University Chest such a proportion of the balance as shall be agreed upon between the [new joint] Syndicate and the Council’.

It is not at all clear how substantial that may be or what underpins the financial argument for the merger. The Council was informed on 19 October that ‘there continued to be a significant impact on Cambridge University Press and Cambridge Assessment, with transfers to the Academic University expected to be very limited in the next two years’. We have already seen that the forecasting about the financial damage of Covid-19 upon the University has turned out to be unduly pessimistic, but that does not mean that huge optimism can be justified that Cambridge Press and Assessment will be a substantial financial asset to the University.

The reason why the Regent House has had to be asked for its consent—at last—is that the CUP is protected by Statute J, for any change to which the Privy Council’s consent will be needed as well as a Grace (likewise UCLES/Cambridge Assessment by way of numerous mentions in the Ordinances, changes which the Regent House will also need to Grace).

This *Report* has a title which should stop Regent House readers in their tracks. It is a “*Report of the Council on recognition of the merger of Cambridge University Press and Cambridge Assessment in the University’s Statutes and Ordinances.*” That would make the approval of the necessary changes to the University’s legislation a mere tidying-up operation, to a ‘done deal’ in the doing of which the Regent House had had no part. A Syndicate is a committee of the Regent House so should it not have been told when two of its Syndicates put a scheme to the

Council proposing their abolition and the creation of a new one?

On ‘legal advice’ the Council thinks it is fine to merge the Local Examinations Syndicate and the University Press Syndicate into a new single one. The *Report* confusedly asks the Regent House ‘to reflect and enable the forthcoming merger’ in an act of ‘recognition’. But it is asked to do much more than that. It is asked to countenance the dissolution of two of its centuries-old Syndicates, and the creation of an imperfectly-defined new one. Since this new one under the revised Statute J is, as proposed, to exercise ‘the powers of the University’ for purposes beyond those permitted to the Press (new Statute J,3) surely the Regent House should have been given a previous opportunity in a *Report* to understand what exactly it would be delegating and what the academic consequences might be?

Abolishing the Press Syndicate (first called the ‘Curators’) which has been in charge of the CUP since 1698 seems quite a big decision. Academically it is surely a decision not to be lightly taken. How involved and competent will the new Press and Assessment Board be in the decision-making which for centuries has made would-be CUP authors wait nervously for final acceptance of their book proposals? The CUP’s authors will rightly fear that the name of the imprint will change, and surely with it the repute of the publisher and its authors. Will CUP books in future bear on their spines the legend “Cambridge Press and Assessment Board”?

Abolishing what the Statutes and Ordinances still call UCLES also sweeps aside quite a history. UCLES first got its name in 1858, when the Syndicate of thirteen of the University’s academics was created. It has survived its series of mergers but still with the name and constitutional fact of that ancient Syndicate. Whereas OUP’s Delegates still have to be drawn from Oxford’s academics, there is to be ‘more flexibility’ in appointing Syndics to Cambridge’s new joint Syndicate. They will no longer have to be members of the Senate, so allowing the involvement of non-academic senior employees of Cambridge Assessment.

The word ‘business’ occurs more than a dozen times in this *Report*. But the merged entity is to remain a Department of the University. Indeed the word Department is to be added to Statute J, 1, which changes from ‘There shall be in the University a University Press’ to:

‘There shall be in the University a Press and Assessment Department concerned with publishing, assessment and the provision of associated services. Such Department shall...’

The plan, says the *Report*, is to Grace arrangements for the ‘new business entity’ to run from the beginning of the new financial year. Why the rush? There certainly is a rush. Recognising that it is unlikely that the Privy Council’s consent will be received by August, there are to be ‘transitional arrangements’. In any case, the plan is admitted to be still far from ready to run:

‘The Council intends to review further the overall governance arrangements for the merged businesses once the operational matters arising from the merger have had time to bed down.’

There may be good reasons for this merger, but the Regent House has still not been told what they are. What protection will there be in this new undefined ‘business’

model against degrading of the work of the Press? The Discussion is due on March 9 allowing few enough weeks before the beginning of the next financial year.

A challenge to proposed changes to Investment management

How long it can take if the Regent House calls a ballot is being demonstrated in a third controversy of the term. Cambridge is in the middle of a challenging proposal from its Council which provides a handy example of the contrast between the way in which the Regent House may make known its displeasure and refusal to consent, in marked contrast to the much speedier process available to Congregation. A Discussion was held on 26 January on a *Report* published on 16 December 2020, proposing the Establishment of an Endowment Fund Supervisory Body. This would take over the University's Investment Management. The *Report* carried a Dissenting Note signed by three members of the Council whose objection was summarised in their warning that:

'If these proposals are accepted, they will disempower the Council and the Regent House and create a quasi autonomous entity populated entirely by self anointing members who have 'relevant professional experience in finance'.⁸

Remarks made in the Discussion were published verbatim in the *Reporter* as usual, several expressing

much the same concern. A Council *Notice* in response, dismissing the concerns raised, was published on 17 February.⁹ On 26 February a Ballot was called by 48 members of the Regent House (only 25 needed). The postal vote is to take place between 22 March and 2 April.

G.R.EVANS

¹ <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2020-21/weekly/6607/6607.pdf#page=18>

² <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2020-21/weekly/6607/6607.pdf#page=18>

³ <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2020-21/weekly/6608/6608.pdf#page=5>

⁴ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/cambridge-university-press-to-join-with-cambridge-assessment>

⁵ See Statute I, V, 15-7 on Departments with a capital D

⁶ <https://www.cambridge.org/about-us/annual-report/finances>

⁷ <https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/566110-annual-report-18-19.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2020-21/weekly/6601/6601.pdf#page=11>

⁹ <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2020-21/weekly/6607/>

Philosophy changing

Sir – I can shed light on a detail in Anita Avramides's excellent article 'The Passing of an Era – Reflections on Philosophy in Oxford in the 20th Century' (*Oxford Magazine*, No. 429, 5th Week, HT 2021). The degree in Philosophy and Modern Languages was indeed established 'in the early 1970s'. To be more precise, the regulations first appear in the *Examination Decrees* in 1972, for first examination in Prelims in Hilary Term 1973, and for Final Honours in Trinity Term 1974.

However, the new degree was not advertised in the prospectus until 1973, for candidates for entry in Michaelmas Term 1974 (*Prospectus 1974-1975*, p. 5). This cohort would have sat Finals in 1977 at the earliest. (In those days, a third year abroad was not compulsory, though it was sometimes taken.) By 1978 the average entry is recorded as a healthy twenty-three (*Prospectus 1979-1980*, p. 105).

TO THE EDITOR

Thus the degree was on the books one year before it was advertised to potential applicants. That created the possibility, for anyone already matriculated, to transfer into it before it had properly opened for business – provided one found out about it and was allowed to change by one's college. I know, because I was one undergraduate who did so. After a year of PPE, I entered into the second year in Michaelmas Term 1972, and (after a third year abroad) sat Finals in Trinity Term 1975. The class list – then still public – revealed to me that there had been three others. Whether anyone sat Finals in 1974 I do not know.

One feature of the new degree was that papers in Philosophy were devised for it that were not offered in any other combination. These included Aesthetics and Medieval Philosophy. Thus PML was a bridgehead for that broadened understanding of the field that Dr Avramides describes.

In that connection it would be worth adding to the names she mentions that of Patrick Gardiner (1922-1997), my tutor for the Aesthetics paper. He read first History, then PPE, for his undergraduate degrees. His interests – philosophy of history, aesthetics, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard – were not those of most Oxford philosophers of his time. He is thus part of the story Dr Avramides tells about the way Oxford philosophy changed in the twentieth century.

Yours sincerely
KEVIN HILLIARD
St Peter's College

REVIEWS

'Your holy-shit moment' and other scenes

Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (Viking, 2020. £35).



Most reviews of political autobiographies concentrate on the political motivations of the figures, and trawl through them hoping to find juicy bits of political gossip and revealing personal confessions. Some take the opportunity to assess the broader picture, as does Eric Foner in his excellent review of *'A Promised Land'* in *TLS* (4 December, 2020). I want to take a different approach and consider it as a literary work, to see how it compares with autobiographies regarded as aesthetically worthy. This, the first instalment, is, for the most part, a very good read. It takes us up to the assassination of Osama bin Laden and a tenth anniversary celebration at Ground Zero, to remember the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. I refuse to call it 9/11. Any more than I call the Capitol Riot 1/6.

What we have here is not just an autobiography of Obama; it is a history of recent America. Indeed its very title takes the attention away from the individual. As one reads in February 2021 in the background is the constant awareness of the Trump impeachment and the crisis for the Republican Party. The decency of McCain and other Republicans and the collective endeavours between the two parties years back is a constant rebuke to the present.

'Dying is an art' says Sylvia Plath in *'Lady Lazarus'*, but living is an art too, or should be. What needs to be said at the outset is that Obama's autobiography is an indication of a highly intelligent and perceptive person. On almost every page as one reads one thinks, by painful contrast, of another President. One sign of a decent individual is that one can imagine having a constructive conversation with him or her. Obama quotes from *'The Second Coming'*, so I could chat about Yeats. No such thing would be possible with Trump.

Autobiographies are different from diaries, because they are based on organising memory, rather than day by day transcription. They are best written on the death bed, or its near equivalent, when life is almost complete. Obama is, in a sense, now in a state of living death, the high drama complete and tucked up safely for the night. The great challenge for the autobiographer, especially someone who has

been in the public eye, is to achieve the balance between inward looking and outward looking. What we need from the autobiographies of the famous is some explanation of how they arrived at where they are in their high-profile identities. Have they maintained a consistent identity?

In our age this is difficult to do, because the maps of personality have changed, and we are used to notions of fluidity – the kind of fluidity I dealt with in my review of *'The Life of Forms in Art'* (*Oxford Magazine*, No. 427), when identity is reduced to a chaotic mass of disorganised impressions. What is true in normal self-consciousness is that we are liberated, reflecting on our lives, from relentless chronological sequence. To use a Proust image, time is like a vessel in which we float freely up and down:

"Car l'homme est cet être sans âge fixe, cet être qui a la faculté de redevenir en quelques secondes de beaucoup d'années plus jeune, et qui, entouré des parois du temps où il a vécu, y flotte, mais comme dans un bassin dont le niveau changerait constamment et le mettrait à portée tantôt d'une époque, tantôt d'une autre." (Albertine Disparue)

(For man is that creature without any fixed age, who has the faculty of becoming, in a few seconds, many years younger, and who, surrounded by the walls of the time through which he has lived, floats within them but as though in a pool the surface-level of which is constantly changing, so as to bring him into the range now of one epoch, now of another.)"

The feel of a napkin in a library takes one back to the rough towel in a hotel years before, and all the attendant marine scenery. I won't cite the madeleine, because that is too routine. Obama's scent-memory turns out to be 'the stale smell of foot-ball uniforms wafting about' when he had to oppose what Marty Nesbitt called 'full ghetto on their ass' after Reverend Jeremiah Wright 'unleashed a rant for the ages.' Autobiographies which follow the sequence of one damned thing after another do not mirror these processes of thought, and are more readily exposed as inventions, taking their templates from primitive fictions.

There is a retrospective shadow thrown over his life – for us as well as for him. He begins, non-chronologically, with an account of walking to work in the Colonade of the White House. Some would like to know something about his first car, but it is only unveiled much later, when there is a discussion about a union between Chrysler and Fiat to try and save the company. Brian Deese goofs and says that Fiats are capable of 40 mph instead of 40

miles to the gallon. Obama says, recalling his first car, which was a red Fiat, 'As I remember, it went over forty miles an hour... when it wasn't in the [repair] shop.'

There are full accounts of the economic crisis in 2008 onwards, the climate-change initiatives (highlighted by the dreadful *Deepwater Horizon* disaster in the Gulf of Mexico), the Middle East search for peace and the internal efforts for social justice and the good life. Time after time one encounters generous and appreciative evocations of his aides in vivid vignettes. It's amazing that he remembers all the names. They must have loved him. He usually tries to steer himself away from the vain-glorious.

Many readers will find this all a bit overwhelming, and there might be a case for two versions: a full one for political junkies and one less than half the length for the common reader (if that concept still exists). English readers whose picture of our political machinery is as instinctive as knowledge of the off-side and lbw rules might find the American system arcane. They will be mystified by what Tammany Hall is, and what Primaries are. Not to mention the Electoral College.

We get a number of insights into the inside story. For instance, Obama did think of choosing Hillary Clinton as his Vice-President, but was worried by the looming presence of Bill, and the prospect of three in the political marriage. He records the party divisions which have only got worse in recent months. America is particularly riven by them, so extreme that now most Republicans are not much more than pantomime villains. Hazlitt thou shouldst be living at this hour, to provide some analysis of the American political scene; in *'The Spirit of the Age'* (1825) he thought that Britain was scarred by party division which even contaminated literary criticism: 'this nefarious and organized system of party-proscription' (*'Walter Scott'*). At that time in the States it was less of a problem, because although there existed what Washington called 'factions' parties as such had not been invented.

One always looks in political autobiographies for revelations of what the writers really thought about their contemporaries and isn't disappointed. Putin is like a fastidious teenager 'on Instagram' and Sarkozy exhibits 'boldness, charm, and manic energy' and always wants to be 'at the center of the action'. Our own David Cameron removes his jacket and loosens his tie in a display of 'studied informality'.

There is plenty of refreshing humour in *'A Promised Land'*, even one or two laugh-aloud bits. I love those moments when an Indian American news-vendor looked

at his photograph on the front of *Time* and said, ‘Fuuuuck that’ and when the aide, Reggie Love, thought Paul Newman (doesn’t make it to the index) was just the originator of the salad dressing. There is a priceless moment when Nancy Pelosi says to Hank Paulson, who kneels, begging her to co-operate, ‘Hank, I didn’t know you were Catholic.’ And another when Reverend Jeremiah Wright ‘described the conjugal obligations of the newlyweds in terms far more vivid than anything Toot [his grandmother] had ever heard in the Methodist church of her childhood.’

There’s a good incident when he and his team play basketball against some New Hampshire firefighters whose votes are wanted. Reggie Love asks, ‘You want us to lose to these stiff?’ Obama replies, ‘Nah, I wouldn’t go that far. Just keep it close enough that they’re not too pissed.’

As they start to come out of an economic crisis Christy Romer asks if they can get recognition in the form of plaques. Obama, ‘We can’t afford the plaques, but you get to lord it over the rest of the team.’ I especially like the plan to jump-start a plane’s battery with an extension cable. There’s a comic episode when Obama gate-crashes a climate-change meeting in Copenhagen and puts the Chinese delegation on the spot; Reggie Love sums it up: ‘I gotta say, boss, that was some real gangster shit back there.’ The register roams from the plangent to the profane.

Obama has a good eye and ear, and often notices things. He sketches intimate moments on his ‘slightly rickety back porch’ in Chicago, ‘where I’d sometimes interrupt families of raccoons foraging through our trash cans.’ Reminiscent of Heaney’s ‘*The Skunk*’:

*“And there she was, the intent and glamorous,
Ordinary, mysterious skunk,
Mythologized, demythologized,
Snuffing the boards five feet beyond me.”*

He is sensitive to the quality of light in the Oval office and observes that at night it ‘remains luminescent, flaring against the darkness like a lighthouse’s rounded torch.’ Giving a speech in Springfield he registers the ‘collective breath’ of the crowd like ‘hovering patches of cloud’ and on another occasion a ‘smattering of applause’ is ‘muffled by mittens and gloves.’

There is a good deal of direct speech, especially pithy and telling phrases. Two memorable ones are here, when he told Hillary Clinton during a Primary debate that she was ‘likable enough’ and the time when he said that all that some working-class Americans could cling to by way of consolation was ‘guns or religion’ – both of which he regrets. It’s a good job the sceptical Reggie Love was around when Obama discovered just in the nick of time that one of the phrases in a speech had been used by Hitler: ‘Probably not the effect you’re going for.’ On the visit to Egypt David

Axelrod and Emanuel Rahm descended a ladder inside the Great Pyramid, ‘the mystery of which was punctuated by Axe’s timeless words: “Goddam it, Rahm, slow down – your ass is in my face!”’

He recounts that classic scene which has now gone down in legend when he said at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, ‘Now, I know that he’s taken some flak recently, but no one is happier, no one is prouder to put this birth certificate matter to rest than the Donald. And that’s because he can finally get back to focussing on issues that matter – like. Did we fake the moon landing?’ Etc. Cruel, but thoroughly deserved. As a vulnerable narcissist the Donald didn’t find this funny. Who then could have foreseen what an enormous lie he would disseminate in the Autumn of 2020?

What is excellent is the way in which many episodes are drawn to a close with some telling remark. It’s a bit like the device whereby Shakespeare indicates the end of a scene with a couplet. Just a few examples: Valerie Jarrett tells him, ‘they just don’t like seeing you being put in this position,’ and Obama replies, ‘Which position? Being Black, or being president?’ After difficult negotiations, ‘I love that woman’ (Nancy Pelosi). When Obama’s team is worried that the Republicans might get wind of tough environmental policies he says, ‘Better hide the recycling bins.’ One such closure has Teddy Kennedy saying to him, ‘The time chooses you. Either you seize what turns out to be the only chance you have, or you decide you’re willing to live with the knowledge that the chance has passed you by.’ – a prosaic version of Brutus’s ‘There is a tide in the affairs of men.’ When after the Copenhagen conference Michelle tells him that Malia is probably going to ask him whether he saved the tigers he says, ‘I’m working on it.’

But. There’s always a but. There’s a serious trap lying in wait for autobiographers – of inventing direct speech in the interests of vividness. Obama indulges in a fair amount of this. The great thing about reported speech is that it can shorten narrative and save a few trees.

My own view is that we have to be extremely sparing with direct speech in autobiographies, since what survives authentically from the remote past is only the odd phrase. And some of them are very vivid. I have no doubt that when the infant Betje-man, or the narrative figure in the poem, was at a party someone actually said what he records in, ‘False Security’: ‘*I wonder where Julia found that strange, rather common little boy?*’ A negative epiphany if ever there was one. If I were employed as a ghost writer for a celebrity’s memoirs it would be a stipulation that there would be no fake conversations. So we more or less believe that Michelle said ‘I won’t vote for you’, but total belief has been sapped by other bits that are clearly invented.

* * *

What is the bedrock of Obama’s stance? It’s his mother, and her belief in making things better for others. He stumbled into politics. He thought he might be an academic. He didn’t have ambitions to be President when he was a child. There is not the equivalent photograph of him standing in front of No. 10 like the eight year old Harold Wilson. (I wish I didn’t have that image in my mind.)

Of course in many cases Obama has access to printed and visual records, as we all do. He states the case very well when he mentions his speech on being elected:

“But I worry that memories of that night, like so much else that’s happened these past twelve years, are shaded by the images that I’ve seen, the footage of our family walking across the stage, the photographs of the crowds and lights and magnificent backdrops. As beautiful as they are, they don’t always match the lived experience.”

To a lesser degree this applies to all of us, especially in the age of ubiquitous recording. And after all, our point of view of watching Obama on the stage, electronically recorded, is different from his internal one, both at the time and in retrospect. It’s that interiority which autobiographies are supposed to catch, and it reminds us how very difficult it is to seize and define an event. It is philosophically highly elusive in its pre-history state.

Obama is frank about the toll running for office and being President exacted on his family. And on himself. Reading this book one wonders why anyone in his or her right mind would want to run for President. Once fame struck he often wanted to slip away to grab a taco, but if he did the taco didn’t taste the same when surrounded by gun-toting security personnel. He writes, ‘Sometimes I’d fantasize about walking out the east door and down the driveway pass the guardhouse and wrought-iron gates, to lose myself in crowded streets and reenter the life I’d once known.’

Later he records a recurrent dream of walking down a street unrecognised, and thinks he has won the lottery. It’s a topos which goes back to classical times, Germanicus and Nero in Tacitus, Shakespeare’s Viennese Duke in ‘*Measure for Measure*’, his Henry V before Agincourt and our own monarch mingling with the crowds on VE day when she was Princess Elizabeth. It’s less and less possible now. When in a restaurant everyone around falls silent as they try to over-hear what he and Michelle are saying. He had a prevision of what restricted life was about to become when he went surfing and the agent Dave Beach said to him, ‘I hope you enjoyed that, ’cause it’s the last time you’ll be able to do it for a long, long while.’

It’s not just Obama but the family exiled from a normal life. Michelle said that ‘one of my main goals as First Lady is to never

be photographed in a bathing suit.' Early on she said 'I didn't sign up for this'. Many all over the world would like her to run for President, but the insights revealed in this book suggest it's not on the cards. The whole disruption to normal life is summed up by his daughter saying on the day of his victory, 'This is kind of too much.'

* * *

Obama stands for something symbolic, since he represents an attempt to unify America, to heal wounds sustained from the very beginning, when racism proved so decisive and even the reconstruction after the Civil War did not cure. He is an iconic figurehead who might embody the change and the idealism. There are many vignettes of ordinary people, whose lives he wanted to improve, and I kept on being reminded of the plangent conclusion of *'Middlemarch'* (which Judi Dench read so beautifully at the end of the television version in 1994): 'for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.'

Thinking about the tornado disaster in Alabama he writes, 'I was reminded that so much of what really mattered in government came down to the daily, unheralded acts of people who weren't seeking attention, but simply knew what they were doing and did it with pride.' Similarly, in a speech he says, 'Our history has always been the sum total of the choices made and the actions taken by each individual man and woman,' and in another he refers to 'those quiet heroes that we have all across America. They're not famous. Their names aren't in the newspapers. But each and every day they work hard....They aren't seeking the limelight—all they try to do is just do the right thing.'

Always for me there is Shakespeare in the background—who made the first really concerted effort to describe what it is

like to be a ruler behind all the pomp and circumstance: the anxiety of Henry IV, the secret guilt of Claudius, the melancholy of Richard II as he speculates on death keeping court in 'the hollow crown'. Obama was in that privileged position to know what it is like to be inside the adored public figure, with all the guilts and insecurities. He asks what is the \$64,000 question on the situation of the political leader:

"Looking back, I sometimes ponder the age-old question of how much difference the particular characteristics of individual leaders make in the sweep of history—whether those of us who rise to power are mere conduits for the deep, relentless currents of the times or whether we're at least partly the authors of what's to come. I wonder whether our insecurities and our hopes, our childhood traumas or memories of unexpected kindness carry as much force as any technological shift or socioeconomic trend."

Carlyle would have felt able to answer it, but Obama, though in a privileged position, is unable to. There is a Shakespearean moment at the beginning when Obama talks about the gardeners at the White House 'the quiet priests of good and solemn order', and one recalls the presence of gardeners in that beautifully euphuistic scene of *'Richard II'* (III.iv): 'Why should we, in the compass of a pale, / Keep law and form and due proportion?'

'A Promised Land' is a good story. At the end especially things hot up: the war on Gaddafi, the assassination of Osama bin Laden, which, as Wellington might have said, was 'a damned nice thing—the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life,' especially when the helicopter clipped the wall of the compound. I have mentioned that there are plenty of comic moments, and there's one here too, when Obama quipped to the commander of operations, Bill McRaven, who had a six-foot-two member of the swat team lie next to the dead bin Laden to confirm that it was him: 'Seriously, Bill? All that planning and you couldn't

bring a tape measure.' He later presented him one on a plaque.

The memorial celebrations in New York at Ground Zero are heart-rending, but with the charming human touch of the daughter of a victim, Peyton Wall, asking him if he could arrange for her to meet Justin Bieber (who doesn't make it to the index): 'I told her I was pretty sure I could make that happen.' There's such a lot Shakespeare would seize on, especially that moment when a group of Middle-Eastern negotiators look at their watches to check that the sun has officially set, so that they could break their fasts. The best photograph at the end is of this.



In the White House. Hosni Mubarak and Benjamin Netanyahu check their watches to see if the sun has officially set.

Obama is in no doubt at this moment that they are actors in giant's clothes (to use an image from *Macbeth*) going through a 'ritualized performance,' and that when their costumes and make-up are taken off 'backstage' they will resort to being warring pigmies. This scepticism even applies to himself on occasion. It's all ready-made fodder for a bio-pic, but let it not be made.

The book ends as picturesquely as it began, the Marine One helicopter shuddering slightly as the statue of Lincoln comes into view, 'shrouded in shadow'.

BERNARD RICHARDS

NOTICE

The Editors of the *Oxford Magazine* regret that they cannot publish any material submitted to them anonymously. If the author requests publication on the basis that the author's name and university address be withheld from the readership, the Editors will consider the reasons given and in their discretion may publish on that basis; otherwise the material will be returned to the author.

The next issue of Oxford Magazine will appear in
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